Is Terrorism the Main Threat to Human Security in Northern Africa?

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"Now, we expect things to change. I want my freedom and my rights. I want to work. I want a job."[1] – Jaber Hajlawi, (unemployed Tunisian lawyer)

On the 17th of December 2010, a 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire. After suffering repeated humiliation at the hands of officials and faced with local municipality officers indifferent to his plight, Mohammed Bouazizi drenched himself in fuel and set himself alight in front of the regional headquarters in Sidi Bouzid. Bouazizi's self-immolation was a final cathartic act that reflected the frustration and desperation of hundreds of browbeaten, subjugated and demoralised people.[2] The drastic measure taken by this young man reverberated around northern Africa and kick-started the Tunisian Revolution, the success of which inspired the Arab Spring. Subsequently, events in northern Africa and the actions of Mohammed Bouazizi have helped to enhance the profile of 'Human Security' as a subject of scholarly research and for legitimate consideration in the realm of International Relations (IR).[3]

Despite a renewed academic focus on human security, however, the term remains frustratingly vague. It is subject to varying interpretations, as pointed out by Fen Osler Hampson, who says:

"There continues to be a considerable methodological, definitional and conceptual disquiet about the real meaning of human security, and about its implications for the study or the practice of international relations."[4] (2012: 280)

Indeed, there is a fierce debate being held in current international relations among scholars as to what the basis of efforts to promote and advance human security at the international level should rightfully be. Claude and Weston posit that the conception of human security should be affixed to basic notions of liberal ideology, such as elementary human rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.[5] Prominent IR scholars such as Battersby and Friman, who suggest a broader approach to the theory of human security, oppose this proposition. According to them, the approach "should be widely constructed to include economic, environmental, social, and other forms of harm to the overall livelihood and wellbeing of individuals."[6] (2012: 281) This suggestion has failed to convince a large proportion of IR scholars, though, and has provoked reproach by academics such as Yuen Foong Khong who makes the adroit observation that "making everything a priority renders nothing a priority."[7]

Nevertheless, all academic work concerning this issue is underpinned by a distinct withdrawal from traditional liberal internationalism, as propounded by Lord Palmerston or Woodrow Wilson. This is with regards to the belief that "protecting people from critical and pervasive threats and situations"[8] as well as the safeguarding of "fundamental freedoms"[9] and individuals' "own sense of security"[10] (2012: 280) is pivotal to our understanding of international security. Thus, the characterization employed from here on will be in congruence with that offered by the Report of the Commission on Human Security in 2003, which states that human security "means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military, and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival."[11]

The word "terrorism" is laden with emotional, cultural and political associations that make it unquestionably difficult to define. Conor Cruise O'Brien's understanding of terrorism is it being "unjustified violence against a democratic state that permits effective and peaceful forms of opposition,"[12] (1983: 1), an opinion which may be strengthened by the

events of 9/11, but dismissed as parochial by most academics. Martha Crenshaw, author of*Terrorism, Legitimacy, and Power*, reminds us "terrorists strike not only against the state but also on its behalf."[13] (1983: 144) Crenshaw goes on to explain that there has been a distinct development of terrorism as a foreign policy tool by states such as Libya and Egypt (1983: 145).

Due to the need for brevity, a more elaborate discussion of the contemporary and highly significant debate surrounding the usage of the term "terrorism" cannot be offered at this point. However, Federal Judge Kim McLane Wardlaw offers a satisfying definition of the word proposed:

"Terrorism is the use, or threat of use, of violence by an individual or a group, whether acting for or in opposition to established authority, when such action is designed to create extreme anxiety and/or fear-inducing effects in a target group."[14] (2012: 223)

Finally, professor emeritus at the University of York, Robert W. Cox submits an impeccable account of Critical Theory in his essay 'Social Forces, States and World Orders'. Here Cox explicates how Critical Theory attempts to understand the political and social domain in a single structure rather than as two separate entities. More specifically, he states, "the critical approach leads towards the construction of a larger picture of the whole which the initially contemplated part is just one component, and seeks to understand the processes of change in which both parts and whole are involved."[15] (1981: 135)

The historiography referred to above is an attempt to highlight the controversy surrounding the concept of human security and demonstrate an awareness of the differing and opposing academic opinions on such an indispensable issue. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is essential to give a clear and concise definition in order to establish a domain and avoid misunderstandings and misconceptions. The following analysis will attempt to portray a diverse outlook on the threat of terrorism to human security in the region of North Africa by examining the most commonly documented arguments and painting a mixture of explanations for other equally significant threats to human security in the area.

Terrorism as a Threat to Human Security in North Africa

"Many countries across the region experienced increased instability as a result of the events of the Arab Awakening, and some terrorists attempted to exploit this situation. [16]

This statement, found on the *U.S. Department of State* website, is undeniably true and helps to describe the volatile political and social situation in North Africa post-Arab Spring. One such terrorist organisation is the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which has posed a significant security threat in Algeria, especially in the mountainous region near the capital Algiers.[17] AQIM has perpetrated abhorrent crimes, including kidnapping, assassination of security forces, and suicide attacks using improvised explosive devices (IED).[18] One such atrocity occurred on July 16, 2012 when two suicide bombings targeting the Algerian Military Academy of Cherchell killed at least 18 people and injured up to 35.[19]

Pollisario, Boko Haram and al-Gama's al-Islamiyya equally pose a threat to the region and are representative of huge numbers of smaller more fluid terrorist cells and movements in the North African region.[20] It would be false to assert, though, that organised groups exclusively perpetrate acts of terror, as there are instances of peril posed by individuals, sometimes referred to 'lone wolf terrorism'. On April 28, 2011, for example, one such individual was the source of Morocco's worst terrorist attack since 2003, when Adil el-Atmani killed 17 and injured 25 in an explosion in a Restaurant at the centre of Marrakech.[21]

Jennifer Rubin makes the worrying statement in an article for the *Washington Post*:

"For the past ten years terrorist attacks by al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other militant extremists in the Maghreb and Sahel have increased more than 500 per cent from their low point in the period to hit a high of 204 attacks in 2009."[22]

Here Rubin elucidates the extent of criminal activity and the danger exuding from such highly organised groups to human security, while at the same time showing that 'The War on Terror' is proving to be appallingly ineffective and feeble. One reason for this is that AQIM and the others listed above are only some of many highly active terrorist organisations in North Africa, those of which have used the technological progress represented by mobile phones and the internet to become more efficient and controlled.[23]

It is important to note that the nature of Globalisation, which has led to an unprecedented level of interconnectedness throughout the world, has made it more probable for foreign criminal organisations to cause harm and inflict violence.[24] For example, the *U.S. Department of State* points out: "Press accounts indicated that al-Qa'ida (AQ) leader Zawahiri dispatched AQ fighters to eastern Libya."[25] This claim is strengthened by the revelation that the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya was attacked by militants with links to AQ on September 11, 2012. U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other diplomats were killed in the *Battle of Benghazi*, signifiying a major loss for American Diplomacy in the region and a highly significant breach of security.[26]

This depiction of terrorism in North Africa is opposed by Andrew C. Gagel of the Centre for Strategic & International Studies. He claims in his analysis: *Patterns in Terrorism in North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia 2007-2010*:

"The data that are available, however, do reflect a sharp drop in the overall level of violent terrorism in the region, driven largely by the success of the Algerian regime in defeating extremist movements in that country."[27]

Indeed, Gagel's claim is based on a firm foundation of data acquired in surveys and extensive research, also supported by the *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries,* (AHDR) published by the United Nations Development Programme. The Report[28] contains a survey that lists 21 potential threats, to be numbered in proportion to the level of menace to human security, in an attempt at understanding the most prevalent conception of threat for individual Arab residents. Although the investigation does not indicate a single, common threat being the most potent across the region, terrorism was not considered in the top 5 in any of the surveyed countries. Moroccans thought that poverty and unemployment caused the greatest insecurity[29]. The AHDR offered an intricate and challenging representation of North Africa, and for the purpose of human security, it emphasised some of the main institutional and structural problems encountered in this area. Thus, the AHDR is a valuable source of information, supplying insights into the discrepancies between perceived and actual threats to individuals.

Awful incidences such as the *Battle of Benghazi* have resulted in commentators and journalists, like Rubin, declaring:

"AQIM jointly with other al-Qa'ida affiliates and militant groups […] currently and for the foreseeable future, represent a most dangerous threat both regionally and inter-regionally. Clearly in the failed and fragile states bordering the Sahara, al-Qa'ida has established a safe haven and breeding ground for its activities."[30]

The findings of expert institutional research undertaken by the Centre for Strategic & International Studies and the United Nations Development Programme have made claims, such as the one given above, look hyperbolic and ill-informed. It is of course irrefutable that terrorism poses a significant threat to the population of Northern Africa, but differing, more pressing human security threats can also be observed. Accordingly, in the next section, this analysis will go on to distinguish and elucidate a more complex illustration of threats in the region.

Significant Threats to Human Security in Northern Africa

"For a critical scholar, however, the world of threats and intentions is supremely a constructed one, involving history, culture, communication, ideologies and related factors."[31](1996: 34)

This quote by Keith Krause is helpful in understanding the approach taken toward the key threats to human security in the following analysis because it highlights the importance of humankind's construction of the reality that we are

examining. Perhaps the most unequivocal contest to the traditional concept of security, as well as a form of verification for needing Critical Theory, is the subject of environmental degradation. In the case of North Africa this subject is imperative. The natural environment has bestowed reservoirs of oil, vital to the global economy, within many countries in the region, allowing nations like Libya, Syria and Algeria to tap into the lucrative market and make it the backbone of their respective economies.[32] This region includes some of world's largest known oil reserves "whose exploitation has facilitated an extraordinary transfer of wealth to certain Arab societies."[33]

Unfortunately, the very oil that is being pumped out of the soil and has helped so much in facilitating a more secure way of life for many North Africans is the main cause of increased pollution in the region.[34] The AHDR explains: "Pollution is not only a nuisance, but is also a considerable threat to human security when it contributes to the deterioration of the air, water and soil upon which people depend."[35] The negative effect of pollution on water is one of the most potent hazards to human security in the region. Chemical fertilisers, pesticides and industrial wastewater have exacerbated the situation and the already scarce availability of water has been thrown into an even more fragile state of affairs.[36]

Insufficient supply or access to water has innumerable adverse consequences, but the most distressing are worth highlighting here.[37] Besides being necessary for basic survival, lack of water, and more specifically dehydration, can cause illnesses and weaknesses that result in a plethora of negative effects on people of all ages and genders. Illnesses such as dysentery, besides causing physical anguish, results in absence from school, impeding education, and depriving the family of a helping pair of hands. Furthermore, the arduous and time-consuming nature of collecting water denies family members valuable hours of the day which could be spent on more financially rewarding enterprises.[38] Worryingly, data on water pollution levels from organic pollutants in 15 Arab countries between 1990 and 2003 places 5 North African countries in the top 6 countries with the worst water pollution.[39]

Finally, the AHDR posits: "Water shortages can also cause tensions between neighbouring countries. Access to clean water for domestic or economic purposes reflects power relationships."[40] Thus, violence between states can be precipitated by nefarious changes in the ecosystem. This is an opinion shared by Peter Gleick and Miriam Lowi, who suggest, in their work *Water and Conflict*, that the regional control of water can and is being used as political leverage in international relations.[41] (1992: 9)

With this data in mind, it is worth acknowledging the usefulness of the notion of 'human security' because a concept focusing on 'the state' in International Relations remains ignorant of the threat posed by the degradation of the ecosystem. David Baldwin's reflection that "the study of national security grew more narrow and rigid during the Cold War than it had been before" and that it "militarised the study of security" (1995: 119,125) serves to be particularly true and offers an insight into the revolutionary ideas proposed by the 'human security' approach.[42]

"The principle actors in world politics – whether these are states or not – are social constructs, and products of complex historical processes that include social, political, material and ideational dimensions."[43]

This quote by Keith Krause gives a good elaboration of Critical Theory's attempt to involve the history of a nation in the scholarly conception of it as being a political actor in the realm of world politics. The idea of incorporating history into IR is invaluable because it offers a suitable explanation of many perceptions that positivist IR theories cannot convincingly account for. A good example of this is France's determination to establish the Maginot Line, a heavily fortified set of armaments on the border to Germany, in the wake of World War I. Similarly, America's outrage and the subsequent Cuban Missile Crisis at the discovery of Soviet Missiles on Cuba can only be satisfactorily explained in the sphere of IR through the use of Critical Theory. A more modern example might be the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine, which has shaped many International Relations debates and is a key concern to 'security' scholars and civilians alike.

To Africa, and more specifically North Africa, the historical processes and their contextualisation are just as important, as can be deduced from events of the Arab Spring. Said more explicitly, the recent wave of social and political revolt in the Arab region seems to be the result of a profound and fundamental internal process of change grounded on long-standing grievances. This is eloquently summed up by Hriday Sarma, Special Correspondent for

Global South Development Magazine, in an article for e-ir.info: “The attempts by most Arab rulers to usurp power and then cling on to it by hook or by crook have historically been a de-legitimising phenomenon across the Arab world.”[44] He goes on to state “former victims of state persecution and inattention joined hands to demand freedom, self-determination, dignity, and prosperity.”[45] Here Sarma accurately portraits the subjugation of the peoples in regions of Northern Africa and underlines this as one of the core reasons for revolt and the eventual overthrow of many autocratic Arab rulers. Regardless of their formal obedience to the main international human rights agreements, the ousted autocratic rulers still fell short of meeting international human rights law standards and guaranteeing basic social and political rights, strengthening the peoples’ perception of the regimes as illegitimate. This case-in-point emphasizes the value of Critical Theory due to its ability to help explain the Arab Awakening and account for the subsequent implications for human security in that region.

The horrible subjugation and suppression perpetrated by the despotic rulers in Northern Africa are often directed against a specific group in society. Physical violence, harm and social discrimination aimed at women is prevalent in the Arab states and ranges from genital mutilation at a young age to forced marriage and even to an inferior standing under national law (2012: 287). Indeed, many women are prevented from receiving an education and finding a job, and even in the wake of the Arab Spring, which saw both genders fighting for freedom, the situation has not improved. “The revolution was supposed to improve things for women, in fact the situation appears to be changing for the worse,” stated Irine Zareef, director at the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights (ECWR). In an interview with the *New Statesman*, Zareef explained the disastrous consequences the Arab Spring has had for women: “Women today make up just 2 per cent of MPs in Egypt’s new parliament. An unprecedented 984 woman ran for parliamentary seats, but only nine were successfully elected.”[46]

The discrimination against women in the Arab region of Northern Africa is not exclusive to the political sphere. Due to the low levels of education in the female population, many societies still maintain a patriarchal structure in which the man is superior to the woman. This patriarchal system does not derive solely from the regional culture, but is instead a consequence of the financial dependence of women on men, legalised discrimination, as well as family and institutionalised violence.[47] This point is supported and elaborated on by Sara Hashash of the *New Statesman*, who states:

“Arab women encounter violence throughout the different phases of their lives: in girlhood, violence can come in the form of physical, sexual and psychological abuse; female genital mutilation; child marriage; and child prostitution and pornography; in adolescence and adulthood, such violations can expand to include sexual abuse and rape, forced prostitution and pornography, trafficking in women, marital rape, and partner violence and homicide.”[48]

According to the AHDR, the estimated prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt in 2005 in girls from 15 to 49 was 95.8 per cent and 90 per cent in Northern Sudan, strengthening Hashash’s point on physical violence perpetrated against females from a young age.[49] Interestingly, the toppled Egyptian dictator Mubarak, whose corruption and violent suppression of the Egyptian people caused a revolution, maintained a 12 per cent quota for women in Parliament.[50] This kind of socially beneficial legislation implemented by a murderous tyrant is difficult to analyse when using positivist theories. As Krause points out, however, post-positivist theories such as Critical Theory are advantageous because they utilise: “Interpretive methods that examine actors’ understandings of the organisation of their social world, as well as the relationship between these understanding and the social structures and practices, in which they are embedded.”[51] Krause offers an illuminating account of the expedience of Critical Theory, and through examples such as the relatively beneficial role of Hosni Mubarak on the empowerment of women in Egypt, it can be inferred that Critical Theory is relevant and useful in enlightening upon the nuanced sites that need to be explained in IR.

Finally, no analysis of threats to human security can overlook the issue of poverty. The AHDR suggests: “human poverty, a term to capture the deprivation of capabilities and opportunities”[52] as a concise definition of the term. A partial insight into the manifestation of poverty in Northern Africa is supplied by the World Bank, which published data on income and poverty rate in African countries in 2008. Tellingly, Egypt and Syria came first and second, with Egypt’s poverty rate standing at 40.93 per cent of its 72.8 million population.[53] Morocco’s poverty rate is almost equally high at 39.65 per cent, leaving 11.3 million Moroccans in poverty with incomes of $2.70 or less a day.[54]

Although these numbers seem startlingly high, the AHDR is quick to point out that the rate of extreme poverty between 1998 and 2005 has been decreasing: "Along with falling rates of extreme poverty, insecurity arising from human poverty, insecurity arising from human poverty is also declining over time."[55] This extract garners support from an examination of Algeria's past rates of unemployment and its overdependence on oil and gas exports that have been used to subsidise housing, implement free health care, and effectively fight unemployment.[56]

Houari Boumedienne, who had led a military coup and established himself as leader in 1965, presided over and instigated beneficial reforms in an attempt to improve the security of his fellow countrymen.[57] However, in doing so, Algeria's economy became over-reliant on oil, and when oil prices fell from $40 a barrel in 1980 to $10 a barrel within the space of 6 years, it led to an economic slump, which, in turn, caused high unemployment, inflation, poverty and rioting on the streets of Algiers.[58] This example serves to illustrate how poverty, economic policies, unemployment, and human security are intertwined in a complex mesh of interconnected social and political factors. Evans and Phillips, authors of *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, point out that unemployment in Algeria remains around 10 per cent due to the government's corrupt handling of oil revenues.[59] The *Arab Human Development Report 2009* supports this supposition by stating:

"The increased structural fragility of Arab economies is an evident consequence of their continuing to rely on volatile, oil-led growth. This growth model has negatively impacted the labour market, and Arab countries now suffer the highest unemployment rates in the world."[60]

Conclusion

"Our knowledge of the subjects, structures and practices of world politics is not objective, since the organisation and explanation of the 'facts' of the world is a collective (and social) process involving observers and/or social actors.."[61]

The quote from from Krause's essay 'Critical Theory and Security Studies' reinforces the Critical Theory paradigm espoused by this essay in recognising that complex social and political issues could not simply be measured and understood through empiricism alone. Part of this essay has aimed to elucidate the need to comprehend empirical data as a part, and not as the whole, of the answer to questions in International Relations. Instead, there is a need to understand the historical processes and of the ability to contextualise the behaviour of actors in the sphere of IR.

Human security has become an indispensable factor in international affairs, yet the increased range of 'security' as a subject in scholarly research may have helped to make the people of the world feel less secure. As the AHDR suggests:

"The current security picture is paradoxical. As a writer in the Financial Times aptly put it, 'The world has rarely been more peaceful or felt so insecure.' According to a recent report on human security, there has been a sharp decline since the early 1990s in civil wars and other forms of armed conflict."[62]

One such source of insecurity came about when, in the wake of the Arab Spring and the general state of anarchy which ensued, it was feared that terrorist organisation such as al-Qa'ida would come into possession of armaments stolen from toppled governments, such as Gadhafi's in Libya.[63] Terrorism is undoubtedly an inimical factor in the pursuit of human security, although, as this essay has shown, it is by no means the only issue and not the most significant either. The collision between the dearth of available natural resources, especially water, with rising environmental degradation, and the effects of the almost ubiquitous discrimination against women in Northern Africa represent examples of principal threats to the human security of the region.[64] Women who endured tear gas, persecution and live rounds in their endeavour for more political and social freedom in 2010, for instance, had raised optimism that a modern, democratic Africa would offer greater opportunities for a more egalitarian society. In reality, however, women still have continued to face a mounting number of threats to their security.

Almost all of the sources of insecurity mentioned in this paper are borderless, universal threats, which in the wake of globalisation, could affect people all over the world. Thus, if a new terrorist organisation appears in the Middle East or

North Africa, it is cause of concern for everyone. As pointed out satisfactorily in the AHDR:

"The modern age demands that we think in terms of human security—a concept of security that is people-centred and without borders. A concept that acknowledges the inherent linkages between economic and social development, respect for human rights, and peace." [65]

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