

New Terror or Old News?

Written by Marina Popcov

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MARINA POPCOV, MAR 18 2011

The evolution of terrorism as a tool of political change – has it become more or less effective?

It is less the extent of destruction and more its unpredictable, random, spontaneous and sudden nature that infuses terrorism with power. Terroristic attacks have the potential to deeply disturb human ontological security, which is the basis for individual and societal identity. (Epstein, 2007) In this state of anxiety and uncertainty society may lose the sense and purpose of the self and thus seek to reconstruct the routines or recreate itself. Thus terrorism attempts to achieve this momentum of doubt, fear and disorder when societal and political change seems most possible.

Throughout the last decade the application of this “existential shocks” (Curtis, 2004) have been used in a variety of contexts with different intents, methods and consequences, which lets its “effectiveness” appear doubtful and controversial. The following essay will explore the evolution of this phenomenon according to David Rapoport’s historical concept of the ‘Four Waves of Modern Terrorism’ (2002) and the criteria for the classification of a threat including the factors of actor, means, hostile intent and direction. (Williams, 2008) Further it will attempt to evaluate the “effectiveness” of terrorism as a tool of political change, considering its ability to attract public attention, inflict fear and influence decision-making. In conclusion the text will try to prove that terrorism in its essence has not undergone substantial innovation and that its competence is thus dependent on the evolution and vulnerability of the society it is applied in.

The application of sudden non-state actor violence to achieve political goals can be traced far back in history, but terrorism as a transnational and organized activity was first witnessed in Europe by the end of the 19th century. However the aims and aspirations of the first two waves, continuing throughout the first half of the 20th century, were still mainly restricted to local or national issues.

Equipped with recently invented dynamite and conventional arms groups of “revolutionaries” in France, Spain, Russia, Italy, Germany, Austria and other European states. Unsatisfied with the political and economic power structures within their country, they launched the “Golden Age of Assassination” (Rapoport, 2002) against official and royal personalities in the 1880s proclaiming their ideas via “propaganda of the deed” in leaflets and underground magazines. The idea was to use terrorism as a tool to ignite or trigger the imminent revolution. A notorious example of first wave terrorism are the Russian anarchists, such as the group ‘Norodnaya Volya’, who unsatisfied with the progress of substantial reforms and general living standards, killed many officials and the most prominent among them young Tsar Alexander the Second. The group seized its logistics, finance and support in and outside the Russian borders as for instance in Armenia, Finland, Switzerland and Japan. The series of murders had an alarming public effect and lead journalists to speculations about a Pan-European conspiracy. (Jensen, 1981) Contrary to the speculations of sub-national networks the terror groups were small in number, exclusive in membership, limited in technical means and finance, local in origin, and nationally interested.

Anarchist terrorism peaked with the turn of the century and after the assassination of President McKinley his successor US President Roosevelt declared a “War on Terrorism” in September 1901, stunningly similar to the declaration of President Bush exactly a decade later in September 2001. (Rapoport, 2002) Efforts to counterforce

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transnational terrorism by standardizing European regulations of extradition, prosecution and identification methods and increase the exchange of information and police cooperation culminated in the agreements of Rome in 1889 and St. Petersburg in 1902. However national differences could not be overcome and little effective change happened until the break out of the First World War and the trend of political revolutions all across Europe.

The end of the First World War and the emerging idea of a global structure of sovereign and self-determined states accelerated the process of decolonization, which set the framework for the second wave of terrorism. Non-state violence occurred in colonies, which had to face major obstacles and imperial resistance during the process of independence, such as Cyprus, Palestine and especially Algeria, a prime example of second wave terrorism due to its bloody extent and amount of documentation. Unsatisfied with their political rights and allegedly French identity the Front of Liberation National Algeria initiated a series of attacks against civilian and official targets in 1954 providing the starting point for the Algerian War lasting until 1962. A hierarchic and loosely interlinked organization of self-named "freedom fighters" assassinated policemen and soldiers and bombed public spaces, also known as "café wars" within an urban infrastructure, further following the guerilla warfare strategies of Mao in the rural areas. (Rapoport, 2002) With continuing complications, a rising financial burden and pressure from their transatlantic allies France agreed to the Algerian independence in 1962.

The concept of systematic elimination of government control was based on the ideas of Franz Fanon, a Martinique psychiatrist, who discovered parallels between the suppression of the colonial population and the madness of his patients. Both are, according to Fanon, not capable of self-determination but simultaneously completely unaware of their lack of choice. In his writings he concludes that as the madman does not know that he is crazy the black man does not realize that he is suppressed. (Julien, 1996) To liberate the colonial population from their alienated identity and the influence of what Steven Lukes called the "third face of power" (1974) the practice of violence is necessary. Fanon suggests that the act of aggression committed against the suppressor wipes off the artificially implanted consciousness and liberates the suppressed from their deluded self-awareness. (Fanon, 1965) In this context terrorism is used very precisely as an instrument to destroy one imposed identity and achieve a blank state of mind, what Fanon called a *tabula rasa*, a start from scratch. However, although the direct goal of national independence was achieved, in practice the blank paper was not reached and Fanon in his theory did not take into account the Islamic and Arabic cultural heritage of the Algerian population, which stepped in and prevented an innovative political change and recreation of the bureaucratically liberated Algerian society. (Julien, 1996)

Hence although the first half of the 20th century was driven by very radical political change, terrorism in this context it seems has not been a triggering or initiating factor of reversal but a byproduct of historical progress in the Hegelian sense of the struggle between major antagonisms.

The main characteristic shift of the last two waves of terrorism is the transnational nature of their goals and the targeted audience. Further advancements were the technological progress in means and the strategic concentration on urban junctions.

The notion of imperial suppression transformed within the 3rd wave of terrorism. With the process of decolonization formally completed by the end of the 1970s, strive for independence continued on a regional level for example in Spain, France, UK and Turkey. Furthermore reports of atrocities committed by the US forces during the Vietnam War fueled the general discontent with international power relations. Conflicts evolved not only among states or interest groups, but above all between generations culminating in a global protest trend lead by the post World Wars youth against the inherited, allegedly "outdated" or conservative views of the parent generation. (Rapoport, 2002) Groups categorized as the "New Left" across Europe, the US and Japan saw it as their duty to mobilize against the expanding capitalist regime headed by the United States. Western media liked to spread rumors about a global terrorist network maintained by the Soviet Union to support communism, which did not match the reality of ideologically linked, communicating and exchanging but logistically independent local terrorist groups. (Curtis, 2004)

The Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany is exemplary, as it, in its early stage, received remarkable support from the population and fulfilled the attractive image of romanticized adolescent excitement. (Smith, 2008) Their choice of targets became more indiscriminate and detached from national borders. For instance, attacks were directed against

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symbolic targets representing the suppression of people, especially in the 3rd world, by the imperialist transatlantic hemisphere incarnated by US army bases in, NATO affiliates, OPEC delegates, shopping malls and distinguished news paper offices as the Axel Springer Verlag. (Miller, 1985) Kidnapping and hijacking (Time, 1970; Marighella, 1969) were added to the list of conventional and increasingly sophisticated means of organized non-state violence. The goal was to demonstrate the government's inability and disprove the established system. The aggressors were convinced that notions of imperialism, fascism and nationalism survived the aftermath of the Second World War and had to be eradicated by further violence. Aggression was utilized in its simplest form: terrorism to terrorize, inflict fear and punish. Individual assassination as practiced in the first wave experienced a revival, (Ropoport, 2002) when victims, as the banker Juergen Ponto or the federal prosecutor Siegrid Bucback, were handpicked and held accountable for the shortcomings of present society. Direct political change only resulted in increased state control trading security for the cost of citizen liberties. (Crenshaw, 1981) With the end of the cold war struggle and subsequent shifts in global structural power the left wing tensions largely died out while terrorism for the sake of regional independence still prevailed for example in Ireland or Sri Lanka.

The 4th wave of spiritually motivated terrorism was not, as often stated, solely a product of religious fundamentalism or Islamic extremism but the phenomenon was rather placed within a greater framework of continuing political changes in the global power composition. With the fall of the Soviet Union the major antagonism of the 20th century was declared as resolved and theorists as Francis Fukuyama jumped to the conclusion that this kind of contest of ideas would not reoccur and thus announced the "end of history" in Hegelian terms. (1989) He was to be proven wrong when the ideological conflict was replaced by sociological struggles validating Samuel Huntington's prediction of a "clash of civilizations". (1996) According to that model, just as continental drifts create earthquakes, the clashing "societal plates" initiate conflict, wars and terrorism.

Islam does not monopolize the contemporary terrorism, since groups with other sets of beliefs, as the Zionist Igrun or Sikh Babbar Khalsa and others, also committed organized violence. Nevertheless statistically the Islamic extremism dominates the fourth wave in number and force of destruction. The starting point of this period is marked by the year of 1979 when the new Islamic century coincided with the overthrow of the Shah in Iran and the Russian Invasion of Afghanistan (Rapoport, 2002) igniting sentiments of increased pride and enthusiasm but also discontent and aggression within the Islamic community. The combination of events and reactions lifted religious membership to the status of a primary feature within individual identity and thus placed Islamic belief, its strict pursuit, defense and expansion on a top priority level among certain parts of the Muslim community. (Devji, 2005:130) Western, secular, liberal and individualistic views were regarded as opposite, immoral and evil, providing the core for the Jihad principal, the antagonist struggles between Islamic and Non-Islamic ideas. Sayyid Qutb a leading theologian of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s, concluded with many parallels to the ideas of Franz Fanon that the contrasting notions of Islam and liberalism couldn't coexist. Qutb was convinced if there is no conflict between the concepts or full elimination of liberalist thought, but a combination of both, the minds of the believers were contaminated by western influence, which subconsciously misguides them towards the ignorance of the divine law, a state of mind he called Jahiliyyah. Thus their Islamic identity becomes deluded and invalid, eventually even placing them on the enemy's side within Jihad, which they are not aware of. Terrorism again becomes necessary in this concept as a tool to radically shake up the minds of the misguided audience and make them aware of their false consciousness. (Curtis, 2004)

Adding suicide bombing to their means of organized violence new extremist groups were formed in the 1980s to continue the "successful" Jihad beyond Afghanistan, with Al Qaeda among them. However plans to reform regimes in the Middle East and Northern Africa failed during the 1990s, since the audience was horrified but not "enlightened" by the atrocities and death toll. The extremist circle around the leaders Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri saw the need for a change in strategy to achieve their aims. Instead of threatening the "misguided" Islamic people the terrorist group shifted their attention towards its distant opponent, the Non-Islamic, western and mainly American identity. (Curtis, 2004) Therefore one could state that Al Qaeda was seeking political change and shifted their priorities of terrorist strategy from the concept of the 2nd wave, the destruction of false consciousness of the one party, to the concept of the 1st and 3rd wave, the destruction of established power reality of the other party. By doing so Al Qaeda did not abandon the execution of Jihad or innovate terrorism, they only switched sides of whose ontological security to be targeted and doubted. Thus 9/11 attacked the status of the economic and political superpower and the US

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confidence in military homeland security. (Epstein, 2007) Subsequently they also altered their demands from social reform to the withdrawal of US forces and aid from what they categorized as "Islamic lands". (Guardian, 2002)

Due to the large and transnational scale of the attacks in line with previous terroristic operations committed by Al Qaeda, the media and many officials were alarmed by the rise of a global conspiracy terrorist network. It is true that sleeper cells impose a new form of network structure and challenge state security, as painfully witnessed in the London bombings in 2005. Nonetheless the interconnection of the cells with a coherent leading terrorist sub organization could so far not be factually validated. Many skeptics are even convinced that the Americans, who after the end of the cold war were lacking an antagonist entity, exaggerated these notions on purpose. (Curtis, 2004) However, a clear assessment of the extent of political change and its consequences is not possible yet, since the struggle seems to continue until the present day and an end of the wave is not in sight.

The question remains, if contemporary terrorism technically does not differ to a great extent from previous waves, why does the public pay significantly more attention to the 4th wave and shares the impression that today's terrorism has become more dangerous and "effective"?

Eliot Schmidt argues that the major change was the extent of policy response and attention of governments. (2008) Although successful terroristic attacks were previously directed against the USA, as against a Marine Corps in 1983 by the Hezbollah in Lebanon and embassies in 1985 by Al Qaeda in Kenya and Tanzania, strictly seen even on US soil, the government response have been almost insignificant. The fall of the Twin Towers on the other hand caused the launch of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and intense reform of US bureaucracy. (Perl, 2007) Some critiques, as Adam Curtis state that the massive response and the proclamation of the "war on terror" was utilized by the United States as an opportunity to serve long-term domestic goals. The terrorists on the other hand welcomed and this exaggeration to improve their intimidating reputation to attract even more attention. (2004) In a wider context the argument of Ulrich Beck's risk society (1992) gained influence within the last decade. He argues that although the transatlantic hemisphere has become a safer place within the last decade our society has become more concerned with security. What is often perceived as dangerous should be correctly classified not as threats but risks, which unlike threats can be blurred, unknown, unsolvable and unlimitedly inflated. (Williams, 2008) In our increasingly globalized, multi-polar and complex environment the influential and omnipresent new media tends to suggest exaggerated reality to the sensation-addicted audience and thus a false perception of facts becomes inevitable. Hence, "effectiveness" is more dependent on the evolution of the world around us than the methods of terrorism. If society is more vulnerable and prone to terrorism, the instrument of non-state sudden violence becomes more "effective", if considered in terms of publicity and notoriety.

In retrospect, throughout the last century the pool of terrorist actors has become less exclusive, their organizational structure more complex and loose and not restricted by national borders. Further the capacity and variety of their means has broadened taking advantage of technological progress and globalization while their intentions and aims expanded from political and economic realms to the social and cultural field. However these evolutions can be regarded as superficial, making the tool of terrorism more sophisticated and multifunctional but in its core it did not undergo groundbreaking changes. Its method still remains the attempt to disrupt ontological security and to stimulate political change. Thus the direct result of sudden non-state violence remains devastation and assassination by whatever means achieved.

Additionally, if taking a close look at major political change, the ongoing struggle between antagonist worldviews and shifts within power structures, it becomes obvious that terrorism does not initiate change, but vice versa. A long-term process of change usually precedes terrorism. It is dependent on conflict, struggle and instability, which provide a window of opportunity for the input of terrorist groups and further political conversion. Thus terrorism does not occur in stable times or systems.

In conclusion it can be stated that terrorism as a tool for political change did evolve superficially but not substantially in the last 130 years and the effectiveness of its application is not as much dependent on terrorism per se as on the instability of the framework or society it is practiced in.

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Written by: Marina Popcov
Written at: Royal Holloway University of London
Written for: Michael Williams

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