

Debunking the Concept of "New Terrorism"

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AHMAD HENDY, MAY 11 2019

In David Rapoport's highly influential wave theory the fourth and current wave of terrorism is characterized by religious terrorism.[1] This evolution of terrorism is generally believed to have become prominent in the 1990s terrorism. However, another highly contested point is whether this change was another evolution in the history of terrorism, or whether it fundamentally revolutionized terrorism. Since 9/11 there has emerged a large school of 'new terrorism' scholars who argue that the new wave of 'religious' terrorism has been revolutionary and is largely distinct from earlier 'secular' terrorism.[2] Some of these prominent scholars include Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, Bruce Hoffman, and Walter Laqueur.[3] There is no unified theory of new terrorism but a study of the major journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* from 1992 to 2011 has identified certain key features that are largely believed to be unique to new terrorism. These include, in order of prominence, "Increased violence/more deadly, New organisational structures, Religious motivation [non-political], WMD/CBRN, New technologies, Transnational terrorism/diaspora".[4] However, upon reflecting on the history of terrorism it is clear that these features are either not unique, or are a result of the evolving historical context. Changes in 'religious' terrorism are of degree rather than kind.[5] Therefore, the new wave of terrorism is not distinct from earlier terrorism, but is merely an evolution of it.

Torbjørn Kveberg asserts that "the true change in the new terrorists falls from the fact that religion now plays an active role in many, if not all, aspects of a group's activities".[6] However, so-called old, secular terrorism has not been strictly secular in reality. In Northern Ireland, the IRA and the Ulster Volunteer Force were shaped by sectarian divisions between Protestant and Catholic segments of the population. In the 1970s and early 1980s multiple groups merged secular political goals with religion such as the Moro Liberation Front in the Philippines. As a result, Chris Quillen points out the "virtual impossibility of separating religious from ethno-nationalist or separatist motivations".[7] Furthermore, ideology has strikingly similar effects to religion. Both can be used as guides for the structuring of society.[8] Hoffman suggested, "whereas secular terrorists regard violence either as a way of instigating the correction of a flaw in a system that is basically good or as a means to foment the creation of a new system, religious terrorists see themselves not as components of a system worth preserving but as 'outsiders,' seeking fundamental changes in the existing system".[9]

Firstly, there is a false distinction between the "creation of a new system" and "fundamental changes in the existing system".[10] Both of these indicate revolutionary goals, but semantics aside, the point Hoffman is making is that 'religious' terrorists are somehow uniquely isolated and revolutionary, while 'secular' terrorists are more concerned with reform. This is not evidenced by the history. Secular terrorists have often been outsiders seeking revolution. For instance, in the Russian populist Sergey Nechayev's highly influential *Revolutionary Catechism* he wrote, "the revolutionary knows that. . .he has broken all the bonds which tie him to the social order and the civilized world with all its laws, moralities, and customs, and with all its generally accepted conventions. He is their implacable enemy, and if he continues to live with them it is only in order to destroy them more speedily".[11] Anarchist terrorists in the late 19th century and early 20th century sought to overthrow all government and the global system of capitalism. Abimael Guzman, the leader of the Maoist, Peruvian terrorist group Sendero Luminoso claimed, "we begin the strategic offensive for world revolution. . .The people's war will grow every day until the old order is pulled down, the world is entering a new era".[12] Leftist terrorist groups like the German Red Army Faction and the Italian Red Brigades attempted to overthrow liberal democracies, NATO and the international imperialist order.[13]

'Religious' terrorists are also claimed to utilize different methods from earlier 'secular' groups. Ever since Aum

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Shinrikyo's sarin gas attack of 1995, many scholars have claimed that new 'religious' terrorists are more likely to and eventually will utilize weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and chemical and biological warfare (CBW). However, the highly centralized, legal organization Aum Shinrikyo does not fit the criterion of a 'new terrorist' group.[14] Furthermore, the aforementioned gas attack has not appeared to establish a precedent, as it is the only 'religious' terrorist group to have so far used chemical weapons against a civilian population.[15] A survey of bioterrorism and biocrimes involving CBW since 1900 found that 15% of cases were linked to terrorism but that 3.7% were linked to religion.[16] Moreover, there are hundreds of cases of the use of CBW agents by earlier groups. For example, in the 1970s and 80s, a handful of terrorist groups like R.I.S.E. and the Rajneeshees developed such CBW weapons. Additionally, the increased desire for nuclear weapons is linked to technological growth and the proliferation of WMDs, not religion. As even Laqueur admits, both secular and religious terrorists could derive strategic utility from WMDs as they can be used to blackmail, coerce and equalize the balance of power.[17] Moreover, suicide attacks are often seen as a distinctly religious phenomenon. However, it was the secular Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that popularized the strategy in the 1980s, developing the first suicide jackets and belts.[18] Other groups that employed violent sacrifice were the Russian anarchists and the Fenians in the 19th century.[19]

Hoffman described 'religious' terrorism as "a driving force behind the increasing lethality of international terrorism".[20] However, the number of attacks, number of fatalities, lethality (average number of fatalities per attack), and these stats specific to attacks on soft targets reveals that there either is not a substantial increase or that peaks in these indicators are linked to specific contexts not an overall paradigm shift. Firstly, the number of terrorist attacks was steadily increasing from the 1970s until it reached a peak in 1992 (before 'new terrorism' had become dominant). By 2011 the number of attacks had only just reached the level of 1992, instead of establishing an unprecedented number. Furthermore, taking into account population size, the number of attacks per capita annually in Iraq's peak of 2008-2010 was only half of the number in El Salvador in the 1980s. In terms of fatalities, 1998 was the first since 1981 that there were fewer than 5,000 deaths from terrorist attacks. The whole period of 1998-2003 had relatively few fatalities, with 9/11 being an anomaly. And while number of deaths have increased since 2001, they are yet to surpass the fatalities in the 1980s peak. In terms of lethality there has not been the predicted steady increase since 9/11.[21] The peak was reached in 1997 and there has been a decline since then. It is believed that religious terrorists are more likely to indiscriminately attack civilians or soft targets.[22] However, on the whole there has not been a significant increase in number of attacks on soft targets.

Additionally, the higher lethality against soft targets in peak periods of 1997, 2001 and 2006-2009 are attributed to specific events. 2001 is explained by 9/11, while the war in Afghanistan is the cause of the peak in 2006-2009. For 1997, there were numerous events that coincided but the most important was the massacres in Algeria of 4,112 civilians that reached its peak in 1997.[23] These stats show that religious terrorism is not inherently more extreme than 'secular' terrorism. Indeed, earlier secular terrorists have engaged in mass, indiscriminate attacks. The Peruvian terrorist group Sendero Luminoso overwhelmingly targeted civilians, as only 17% of their victims were military or police. Their methods became highly influential and spread across the world. As Martha Crenshaw explains, "like contemporary jihadists, the attitudes of both the Khmer Rouge and Sendero Luminoso were characterized by emotional rage, complete confidence in the rightness of their cause, and hatred for the corruption they saw around them".[24] It is also wrong to assume that all extreme Islamists will resort to indiscriminate terrorism. The Egyptian Islamic Group has renounced terrorism.[25]

These new terrorists are believed to be strictly religious as opposed to political. Laqueur claims that "the new terrorism is different in character [from the old], aiming not a clearly defined political demands but at the destruction of society and the elimination of large sections of the population".[26] When closely examining the statements of religious terrorists it is clear that they mostly have the same pragmatic, political goals of the earlier terrorists. In Osama Bin Laden's Letter to America he called for an end to US support for governments against Muslim minorities (or a majority in the case of Palestine). He also called for the full withdrawal of American military forces from the Middle East. He demanded an end to the US's policy of propping up Arab dictators.[27] Hamid Mir, who interviewed Bin Laden three times confirms that he emphasized these political critiques of the US when talking to his soldiers.[28] Moreover, the fact that Al-Qaeda did not continue to attack the Soviet Union after it withdrew from Afghanistan is indicative of their pragmatic, political goals.[29] The dictatorships in Egypt and Saudi Arabia who are their near enemy cannot be overthrown by force considering that the US supports them.

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Therefore, targeting the far enemy in the US is a pragmatic strategy and was a result of the influx of tens of thousands of US troops into Saudi Arabia.[30] While Daesh's rhetoric is global and apocalyptic, their goal of establishing and running an Islamic state is inherently political.[31] Furthermore, some new terrorists became official political parties. Examples of which are Hezbollah and Hamas, both are parties and the latter is involved in limited governance of the Gaza strip. This discredits the claim that new terrorists are not concerned with public support.[32] In Egypt and Algeria terrorist groups collapsed because they alienated their support bases due to the use of extreme violence.[33] Also Hamas's percentage support in Palestine dropped to around 20% in 2009, when negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians seemed to be potentially fruitful.[34] These terrorist sympathizers and supporters are for the most part not irrational religious fanatics but are instead disillusioned and desperate for real political change.

Another feature of religious terrorism that supposedly makes it distinct from previous groups is its employment of a transnational decentralized structure where local units have significant autonomy. Whereas secular terrorists organized hierarchically, new terrorism is said to be inspired rather than directed from the leadership. This theory however is simplistic and is not corroborated by the evidence. Firstly, it seems that the decentralized network model employed by Al-Qaeda at certain times is an anomaly amongst 'religious' group. Groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, Egyptian Islamic Jihad or Aum Shinrikyo were all quite traditional in structure. Furthermore, Al-Qaeda was largely centralized prior to the war in Afghanistan in 2001.[35] For example, the 9/11 attacks involved much planning and preparation, involving the central hierarchy led by Bin Laden.[36] Therefore, it is very likely that their decentralization was a matter of strategic choice due to pressure from security services around the world and the US invasion of Iraq. Such strategic decentralization is certainly not unique to 'religious' terrorists. The RAF, after the arrests of its leadership became much more self-directed.

The anarchist terrorist wave was also largely self-directed, often an individual choice in response to well-publicized trials of anarchists or general state repression. The anarchists also engaged in transnational terrorism a century before Al-Qaeda, with links between anarchists all across the world. The Palestinian Black September was an autonomous subunit of Fatah, that also collaborated with West German and Japanese leftist terrorist groups.[37] While Daesh was a decentralized network it developed a hierarchical structure when it received funding and expertise from Al-Qaeda. Now it is a bona fide state with an estimated income of two billion dollars. Their fighters are led by the central leadership of Al-Baghdadi, his two deputies in Syria and Iraq respectively and provincial governors appointed by the leader. [38] Therefore, Daesh's organizational structure does not conform to the theory of 'new terrorism'.

Thus, generally speaking, 'religious' terrorism is not new terrorism and is therefore not a distinct category in the history of terrorism. New terrorism scholars exaggerate the difference between ideology and religion, link possible new weapons of terror to religion without sufficient evidence and claim there is a difference in the regularity and lethality of 'religious' terrorism without statistical corroboration. The reality is 'secular' and 'religious' terrorists have both engaged in indiscriminate attacks, presented political and pragmatic goals and have organized in a decentralized fashion and operated trans-nationally. The 'new terrorism' school of scholarship represented a significant discursive shift in terrorism studies after 9/11. And as Michel Foucault argues, mainstream discourses express the interests of power.[39] It is perhaps not coincidental that both George W. Bush and Tony Blair have regurgitated the arguments of new terrorism, with Blair referring to a "new global terrorism. . .driven not by a set of negotiable political demands, but by religious fanaticism".[40] Claiming a new unprecedented threat has allowed these governments to ignore historical counter-terrorism lessons.[41] And constructing a monster that cannot be negotiated with, that can attack internationally at any time serves a convenient justification for the invasion of Iraq and the 'War on Terror'; two events that had little to do with terrorism. Thankfully, there have been terrorism scholars that actually take into account the history of terrorism. Such scholarship will hopefully force people to question their governments' counter-terrorism policy and their role in perpetuating terrorism globally.

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[5] Crenshaw, p.5.

[6] Kveberg, p.15.

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[17] Field, p.204.

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[22] Field, p.199.

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[31] Tucker, p.6.

[32] Crenshaw, pp.14-15, pp.18-19.

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[33] Tucker,p.6.

[34] Field,p.8.

[35] Crenshaw,pp.25-26,p.27.

[36] Field,pp.202-203.

[37] Crenshaw,p.27,p.28.

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