

Has the war on terror been an appropriate response to terrorism?

Written by James Sloan

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JAMES SLOAN, APR 20 2011

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon; it has existed for centuries as a way of creating disruption and fear to day to day life. Yet, to declare a war against it has created numerous questions as to how to fight this multifaceted idea. Terrorism is not a linear concept, and as such runs at various degrees in terms of actions and the reach of those actions. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 on United States soil, the world has become a much more uncertain place. The events of that day would see the former President George W. Bush declare a 'war on terror'. In doing so he launched an invasion in Afghanistan against the perpetrators of the September 11th attack whom were believed to have originated in that country. But military intervention in Afghanistan was only one side of the war on terror. Treating the war on terror as a foreign policy goal meant that as such, the scope to define terrorism and those who act on behalf of terrorist organisations has spread considerably in scope. Therefore, this essay shall examine the UK Foreign Secretary's statement that it is "a deadly tactic, not an institution or an ideology" and to what extent the war on terror has affected the way terrorism is viewed and how appropriate it has been in counteracting it.

"Terrorism, simply put, means deliberately and violently targeting civilians for political purposes." [1]

"...terrorism has been a tactic used by the weak in an effort to produce political change." [2]

The above quotes are just two of an extensive collection of numerous definitions espoused by academics and politicians alike on how to categorise terrorism. Therein a problem exists immediately. A universal definition on terrorism is nigh on impossible to agree on. The old adage that 'one mans terrorist is another mans freedom fighter' adds only to the differences of opinion. Yet, in the Western world at least, it could be said that there does exist a greater solidarity over how to define what a terrorist is. As it stands, the general consensus of what terrorism actually is revolves around the fact that "[it] is characterized, first and foremost, by the use of violence." [3] It is from this base point that variations in meaning occur and as such cause deviations in how to categorise, and thus consequently deal with the terrorist threat.

"The unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" [4]

The above description by the FBI seems to emancipate the idea of David Miliband's that terrorism is a 'deadly tactic'. Describing a terrorist act as deadly thus can mean that it not only kills, but also that it is an 'unlawful' act, thus acting against the rules that society abides by. Disruption to daily life may at times be considered an inconvenience, but the effect of a terrorist attack, such as the London tube bombings of July 2005, completely grinds to a halt the daily existence of individuals, resulting in mass casualties, and civilian deaths. Whilst the perpetrators of such violent acts may wish to see them as political actions, it would be fair to argue that such intentions, due to their illegality, fall outwith the regular polity, thus making them acts of terrorism.

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1566 highlighted key issues in how to deal with terrorism. In doing so, this has created a wide-ranging definition and as such has underlined the legalistic aspect that states must continue to adhere to.

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“Reminding States that they must ensure that any measures taken to combat terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, and should adopt such measures in accordance with international law, in particular international human rights, refugee, and humanitarian law”[5]

The legal issue is one that allows terrorists to try and exploit a nation or government. Whilst it is true that governments can bring terrorists to court, as has been shown in the United Kingdom, with the July 7th and 21st bombers, the whole point is that terrorists act outwith the law, something government itself cannot (or is supposed not to) do. This proves a difficult contention for government to deal with as “...few states could accept application of the law if it meant that all terrorists were deemed to be legitimate belligerents on a par with the regular uniformed forces of a government.”[6] In certain instances, terrorist attacks on states can encourage governments to deal with areas of justice, as happened in Britain over the issue of detention without charge. The government of Tony Blair tried to amend the number of days individuals could be held without charge to a maximum of 90 days, and whilst holding a majority in Parliament, the British government were unable to alter the legislation as to how they wished. This itself was a further move, just two years after altering the detention limit from 14 to 28 days.[7] Later attempts by Mr Blair’s successor, Gordon Brown, to alter the detention to 42 days were met too with further resistance.

It would be fair to say that it is in the interests of both government and the citizens for terrorists to be kept outwith the law in order to draw distinction between those with widely regarded legitimate causes, and those with greater secular interests. Yet, it remains a thorny issue on how to deal with terrorists. Governments will always send strong messages of discontentment, yet terrorists thrive on publicity, thus “There is no greater affront to terrorists than to be ignored.”[8] Yet very few governments do this, for understandable reasons. By ignoring a potential threat and not being honest with the nation, may have political ramifications in the trust held in state institutions.

One has to contend with the logic and understanding behind a terrorist attack. By this, the analysis follows that an act of violence, by an individual, or a small group acting on behalf of an organisation, made against an individual or a government may be illegal, and have dubious morality, yet the greater end goal of such an act may have the consequence of altering public opinion to such a cause. It could be said that terrorists do share certain aspects with the ‘establishment’ when it comes to how the world is viewed, especially when it is seen “...as a struggle of good versus evil...”[9] The contention here is that both sides view each other as the ‘evil’.

It could be argued that the lack of clear definition for a terrorist and that of a terrorist act is the result of differing historical attitudes to such attacks. As was noted in the introduction, terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Having existed for centuries it was primarily based within the borders of nation-states. Factions within national polities such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Britain and Ireland, and Eta, the Basque separatist movement in Spain were regarded as terrorist groupings. The growth of freedom of movement across the world with greater access to regular and inexpensive methods of travel, particularly from the 1960s onwards has created the greater movement of knowledge and as such, such has allowed terrorism has develop trans-nationally. This greater cross-communication between terrorist groups has provided a greater network of co-operation, allowing comparison of methods, and sharing ideological beliefs. This greater mobility has, in turn, led to the situation in which non state based actors are performing across the globe on behalf of numerous groups.

This change in how terrorists now perform has led to different methods being installed by governments in their aims to counter potential threats. Yet whilst the West en mass may agree on what a terrorist is, the reactions on how to deal with terrorism at the root causes greater difficulty. Terrorism has developed differently across the Atlantic in the USA in comparison to Western Europe. In Britain and Ireland, along with Spain, the 20th Century saw these nations deal with terrorism on a domestic scale, with culprits being home grown, as was mentioned earlier. Thus, the native nature of these attacks allowed the related governments to handle the issue of events using domestic policy. Yet the process was not easy, nor especially quick in terms of eliminating the problem. Issues over whether to involve the military apparatus in combating state-based terrorism was an easier problem to overcome than that of trans-national terrorism. Invoking military action on home soil, such as the British Army in Northern Ireland, was easier in the sense that the targets were within a much tighter range; the ‘war on terror’ has meant that although military action occurred in Afghanistan, the dual aspect of fighting the war militarily and philosophically – as will be expanded on later – is one of greater complications. Indeed, whilst home-grown terrorism may, in theory appear easy to remedy, such cases,

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including the IRA, had elements of foreign governments sponsoring such groups. Although never official, the governments of Eire and the United States had been accused at various intervals of sponsoring the IRA.

“...a terrorist act is politically inspired. If not, it is simply a crime.”[10]

If this is true, then to what extent were the September 11th attacks in the United States acts of terrorism by a terrorist? The events of that day were a heady mixture not only of politics, but also, significantly, of religious-inspired hatred. Yet “...declaring war on an emotion is hardly a strategy conducive to success.”[11] And at the early stages, this was all the ‘war on terror’ was – a war against a passion. The aspect of emotion throughout the entire campaign of ‘war on terror’ sat uneasily alongside the military side. The invasion of Afghanistan was to show the public, that action was being taken to route out the cause of terrorism, however “...military alone cannot successfully be deployed by democracies to defeat terrorism.”[12]

Perhaps it is fair to suggest that the ‘war on terror’ required both emotional strings and military might to prove that terrorism could be eradicated. But, to date, this has not been achieved. This, the eighth year of military intervention in Afghanistan has not solved the problem of terrorism; indeed, some may say that it has strengthened the might of those opposed to the US. The Bush response to the attacks, in 2001 caused a little strife between Europe and American due to the fact that the US government was wary to go through the route of joint leadership of NATO. For the first time in its 52 year history, NATO had invoked Article V which states that:

“...an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all...”[13]

Yet, in spite of this the United States had made it clear that it did not wish to be bound to a greater alliance in order to pursue the war in Afghanistan. The dynamics of logistics in Afghanistan would later be altered when NATO took charge of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in 2003. The eventual involvement of the NATO led campaign in Afghanistan continues to struggle, with yet more troops required to provide security and stability in the region. Victory has always appeared to mean the eradication of terrorism, and whilst this is not just United States wishful thinking, it remains the goal of the UN. Counter-terrorism measures have been enacted in numerous states to try and quash the terrorist threat. This has not always provided the stability to fight against the threat, as the July attacks of 2005 in London showed. British government policies had not proved sufficient enough to counter the threat.

“This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to [sic] take a while.”[14]

Indeed, there have been some suggestions that world leaders should look to the case of the Cold War in how to deal with a potential enemy. In doing so, some pitfalls exist. During the Cold War, there was a common enemy; today that enemy is more sparsely spread. The Cold War was also a conflict, albeit metaphorically, against a state. In the ‘war on terror’ it would be unwise to merely point to Afghanistan as the only state involved.

Whilst some individuals may have been critical of the motives of the ‘war on terror’, the notion to rid the world of terrorism rubbished as a utopian ideal of the Bush administration, in fact has the basis in the UN Resolution 49/60 from 1994 which is entitled ‘Measures to eliminate international terrorism.’[15] The document stipulates that governments should do their utmost to eliminate any form of terrorism, yet neatly avoids explaining how such matters could in fact be dealt with.

“To claim that we are going to defeat terrorism, whatever its motivational or rhetorical advantages, is a fairly meaningless aspiration, and an unachievable goal.”[16]

Despite what appeared to be a new term, ‘war on terrorism’ had in fact been uttered by the former President Ronald Regan in 1986.[17] Yet, in Regan’s case the phrase was not used to launch a military tirade, rather this invoked much greater and more subtle metaphorical undertones than President Bush’s use of the phrase. To define terrorism is on the one hand simple, broad brush strokes can define a set of beliefs as ‘terrorist’, yet at the same time to

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accurately define terrorism, it is highly complex.

“Simply to label acts of violence directed against governments as terrorism would be to give a blanket endorsement to the legitimacy of the political *status quo* in every country, regardless of either the ideology of those in power or the regime’s durability.”[18]

Reasoning behind why such variations exist in trying to elucidate the meaning of terrorism could point to the fact that it has entered the daily lexicon to such an extent that it has lost the impact it previously held. A terrorist is making a mark on what they believe will further their cause, whereas someone who performs a crime, is, in general, not doing something, for what they believe to be the changing political order.[19] However, it could be said that terrorists do indeed perform a crime as a crime is an act against the laws of a polity, thus due to the illegal nature of their acts, terrorists are also criminals.

The issue with the war on terror is that the US government treated it as a foreign policy issue – an alien concept to those European states who were able to contain the threat from within their own borders. A contention that was highlighted following the attacks was in the way in which the US dealt with the military response in Afghanistan, once this occurred “It was clear that we were no longer in the realm of a metaphorical war.”[20]

It would be fair to say there is an element of ideological thought common to most terrorist groupings. The ideology exists in which the organisation wishes to destroy the status quo in order to replace it with their own interpretations and beliefs of how the world should operate. The IRA had the ideal of removing the British state from the isle of Ireland; in the end this goal has not, to date, been achieved. Rather, a compromise came to fruition through political means. That however, does not mean that there are not a number of individuals who still stand by the ideology of united free Ireland, indeed, many who still do now understand that they shall not achieve the ultimate goal through fighting, and instead understand the power of the ballot box. So, did this conflict end due to lethargy, and if so, is it possible to suggest that the ‘war on terror’ will too go this way?

al-Qaeda, the group which claimed responsibility for the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington does in fact have a clear ideology laid out as follows

“...in compliance with Allah’s order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims:

The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies — civilians and military — is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.”[21]

This 1998 declaration is part of a very clear mission under the banner of the group branding themselves as the World Islamic Front. From the message to ‘kill the Americans and their allies’ it would be hard not to interpret this as a clear ideological attack on the day to day life of the Western World. But the ideology also runs alongside the deadly tactic element. It could be argued that as much as al-Qaeda would balk at being branded as an ‘institution’ they have in fact become so; an outsider (in the Western World) yet, as much as this sounds oxymoronic, the established firebrands of the Middle East.

David Miliband is correct to say that ‘terrorism is a deadly tactic’; there is little contention with that aspect, yet to say that terrorism is ‘not an institution or an ideology’ is a little more litigious. Whilst terrorists consider themselves as outsiders running against the established order, there is an element of institutionalised behaviour to their organisations.

On one interpretation, it is correct to suggest that terrorism as a whole is not an institution nor ideological. Another way of looking at it is that individual terrorist organisations do in fact hold strong ideological beliefs, the likes of al-Qaeda, holds its vision of what the global order should be. To a lesser extent, the IRA held their own staunch views on British rule in Ireland. The point that is trying to be made is that individual groups do indeed hold ideological

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stances, just as legitimate political parties do, but to brand all terrorism and terrorists as the same, under one ideology would be incorrect.

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