

The Evolution of Terrorism as a Tool of Political Change

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DUMITRACHE ANDREI, MAY 26 2011

Walter Laqueur correctly observed that 'as the 19th century ended, it seemed no one was safe from terrorist attack' (1996:24) proving that terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Going further into history, terrorist activity has been recorded since the times of Cain and Able (Baseren, 2008:1), the time of the Middle Ages, or even the Roman Empire, when organizations such as the Zealots (Bironyim), or the Assassins, were constantly challenging the legitimacy of the existing political order through repetitive acts of political violence such as psychological warfare or assassinations (Chaliand and Blin, 2007). Despite this, theorists such as Audrey Cronin pin point the origins of modern terrorism to the 1795 French Revolution and the reign of terror often associated with Robespierre's "revolutionary tribunals" (2002-2003). Others such as Rapoport believe that modern terrorism started in the 1880s under the theoretical political guidance of Nechaev and Kropotkin, two committed Russian Anarchists, who have described terrorism as being either 'a new form of communication' (Cronin and Ludes, 2004:50) or 'propaganda by the deed' (ibid.). Rapoport has gone further to identify four waves of modern terrorism, waves that are interlinked by historical events (2004).

This essay will emphasize the fourth wave which is characterized by the interpenetration between religion and political activism, a mixture which is best observable in the character of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda. Taking into consideration the growing relevance of globalization in analyzing political, economic, or social developments in the late 20th and 21st centuries, the structure of argumentation will systematically analyze the relationship between the processes of globalization and the way it has helped make the terror groups of the 20th and 21st centuries more effective in bringing about political change. Further, a constant comparison will be done between the effectiveness of current day groups of political violence and historical ones, a comparison which will lead the flow of the present paper toward the concluding remarks on whether terrorism has become more or less effective nowadays.

Before proceeding into deeper analysis of the phenomenology of terrorism, it is imperative that a definition of the concept be provided to the reader. The most relevant definition to the analytical purposes of this essay is the one provided by Chris Rumford who suggested that 'terrorism is the dark side of globalization' (2001:1-2). Another relevant definition is the one provided by Michael Burleigh when saying that nowadays 'terrorism is a tactic primarily used by non-state actors, who can be an a-cephalous entity as well as a hierarchical organization, to create a psychological climate of fear in order to compensate for the legitimate power they do not possess' (2009:xiii). These definitions will help the reader understand the extent to which terrorist organizations have changed their character and level of effectiveness, as well as the origins of such structural and operational developments. Having said this, it is now appropriate to start the incursion into the nature of modern terrorism.

Perhaps the most useful example in the quest for empirical evidence is the case of the world renowned terrorist organization al-Qaeda. It is this complex group of people, driven by radical religious thought and a profound anti-globalization sentiment that has challenged the political order of the international system at the beginning of the 21st century. Al-Qaeda itself could be said to be a 'confederation with quasi-autonomous affiliates, hub and spoke culture' (Seib, 2008:95-99) led by a 'ventriloquist' (Devji, 2008:204) or 'supra-political character' (ibid.) in the person of Osama Bin Laden. What has made this terrorist organization stand out is its efficient organizational culture but also

The Evolution of Terrorism as a Tool of Political Change

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its 'modus operandi' (Arena and Arrigo, 2006:82). Al-Qaeda is a terrorist group with a new dimension, a group which is able to 'communicate, reconnoiter targets, plan operations, travel, meet clandestinely and obtain finances' (Jenkins, 2002:10) under the protection of instruments its predecessors did not possess (Mockaitis, 2008). Its efficiency is mostly derived from the technological revolution of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, but also from the growing economic and political interconnectedness today's international state system exhibits. The main developments that have increased the power of al-Qaeda are the global media, the increased accessibility to air travel, the internet, the mobile telephonic systems, encryption programs, GPS, and online mapping systems such as Google Earth.

The mass-media has a fundamental role in increasing the efficiency of actors engaging in political violence worldwide. Theorists such as Brigitte Nacos have gone as far as describing this relationship as 'mass-mediated terrorism' (2007:15). She went on arguing that due to the strife for sensational, and the appetite for shocking images, global media actors such as CNN or BBC are providing terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda with the means to enter the 'triangle of political communication' (Nacos, 2007:15), and this way spread the psychological effect of their attacks to their real victims, that is the Western civilian populations. Charles Kegley has correctly pointed out that many times 'the psychological impact of an attack can exceed the physical damage' (2003:72). The trend is indeed worrisome as more and more news channels have shifted from a profile of information to one of 'infotainment' (Nacos, 2007:37). The importance of the media for al-Qaeda has been proved by public diplomacy. Democracy oriented speeches of Osama Bin Laden have been clearly designed to influence the perceptions and the views of the electorates in Western countries, and especially in the United States (Devji, 2008). By getting significant amounts of public exposure, terrorist organizations not only find it increasingly easy to recruit alienated citizens in Western societies and all over the world, but also diminish at the public perception level the existing asymmetry between them and the state system. Furthermore, terrorist organizations such as Hamas or Hezbollah have created their own television companies and 'hate radios' (Kaufman in Lennon, 2003:299) in order to 'help keep emotions alive' (Kaufman in Lennon, 2003:304) among the supporting population group and gain legitimacy for their actions. The empirical data provided so far suggests that a global media war is under way and further proof of this fact is the very creation by the US government in 2002 of a US Office of Strategic Influence, designed to 'win the battle for hearts and minds' (Kaufman in Lennon, 2003:299) of global civilian populations and promote US interests through the material that is being broadcasted on all international television channels (Norris et. al, 2003). By effectively using media channels, al-Qaeda is achieving its main public relations goals such as attracting attention to its cause and goals, getting recognition of its aims, and gaining respect and sympathy from troubled groups of people worldwide (Nacos, 2007). The media also helps terrorist organizations transform their legal status to a quasi-legitimate political one by giving interviews on world renowned media channels where Western leaders are also actively present (Nacos, 2007).

It is more than clear the role the mass media has on amplifying or minimizing the effects that political violence can have on people, and on the domestic and foreign policy of Western states. Anarchists in the late 19th century could not have dreamed of the facile dispersal of information that is today available to al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, or other terrorist organizations. If they had the communication infrastructure available to modern day terrorist organizations, they might have been able to achieve more in terms of political changes than just a speech by the American President Theodor Roosevelt calling for a 'global crusade' (Cronin and Ludes, 2004:46) against terrorism. As a startling parallel, al-Qaeda through its 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center has managed to cause two military invasions and a radical shift in US and NATO foreign policy. This reality shows the extent to which globalization and its mechanisms have reshaped the way terrorist organizations think, behave and act on the global stage, or in the global 'democratically mediated political space' (Norris et al., 2003:46). The pattern of mass-media influence in international relations can be said to have been triggered by the Munich events of 1972 when the Palestinian Terrorist organization called 'Black September' killed the Israeli Olympic team. The whole event was transmitted live, and therefore it is considered to have been a 'strategic success' (Burlough, 2009:167) for the Palestinians in terms of drawing the world's attention to their cause, a cause that Western governments seemed no longer able to ignore.

The second most important technological development actively used by members of al-Qaeda is the internet. Besides providing the perfect environment for the spread of the ideological Islamic "unmah" (Seib, 2008), the

The Evolution of Terrorism as a Tool of Political Change

Written by Dumitrache Andrei

recruitment of new members and the launching of attacks against 'weak-minded Americans' (Seib, 2008:109), the internet can provide the instrument to launch cyber attacks on a states' computer infrastructure and this way not only 'disrupt the communication infrastructure of a country' (Kegley, 2003:76), but also counterbalance the existing power asymmetry. Furthermore, the internet provides vital information about the environment in which an attack is to be carried out in, but also technical information on how to assemble an explosive device. Computer programs and technology available online have made it possible for terrorist cells to communicate without detection by government agencies through chat rooms or encryption programs, therefore increasing the organizational efficiency of the terrorist organization. Furthermore, websites have been used to recruit fans but also to promote propaganda through violent games, imagery, videos of beheadings, or manipulated information. Another way the internet is making al-Qaeda more effective relates to financing. If terrorist organizations in the first 3 waves had to resort to kidnappings, robberies, or loyal Diasporas, as was the case with the Red Brigades or IRA, nowadays thanks to virtual trade and electronic payment services hackers can get funds much easier and in a more time efficient manner than ever before. Terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, now have what Seib has termed 'virtual communities' (2008: 184) replacing many of the material or logistical needs any terrorist organization seeks to manage in order to function efficiently. Cronin and Ludes correctly stress the fact that terrorism has become an 'unprecedented threat' (2004:2) because of the technology that is now available to an ever increasing number of individuals. This is true especially if we are to compare the challenges a terrorist organization, such as the third wave Red Army faction, had to face in order to attain some political reaction. The same is valid for groups of political violence from the second or first waves, such as the Russian anarchists, the Irish Fenians, or the Jewish Irgun.

A further driver of effectiveness has been the increase in accessibility of the aviation industry. With regular flights now connecting the most remote places on earth, terrorist cells have found it not only easier to spread terror using the industry in an instrumental way, but have also found a way to become more mobile and escape the radar of international and national policing authorities. Furthermore, the increase in population mobility at a regional level, such as the case of the Schengen Area in the European Union, has been an added benefit to the operations of terror groups which because of the intra-regional freedom of movement can easily relocate or hide and travel for operational purposes (Nacos, 2007). Adding to this, the radicalization of some young Muslim European citizens, it is fair to say that globalization and implicitly the regionalization processes have dramatically helped increase the effectiveness of terrorist operations. Dynamic developments of weapon technology, as well as the fall of the Soviet Union have provided terrorist organizations with the opportunity to acquire weapons of mass destruction. A good example of the scale of the threat, is the 1995 Sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway, mercilessly carried out by the group called Aum Shinrikyo (Kegley, 2003). Furthermore, another threat is the use by terror groups of chemical weapons. With entire weapon technologies now available to a variable extent, it may seem that groups of political violence are being provided with additional strategic advantage by the forces of modernization, and also at a macro-socio-political level by the forces of globalization.

Still, it is fair to acknowledge that for now the threat of either a nuclear attack or a chemical one by a terrorist organization is considerably minimized by the complexity of such weapons, but also because of global non-proliferation regimes and organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Some level of risk persists as terrorists may resort to using limited amounts of nuclear material together with dispersal technologies, which if deployed in civilian areas can cause especially huge disturbances to a city or the economy, rather than a significant number of victims. After all, it is true that at the very basis of any terrorist event are the concepts of psychological warfare and 'calculated strategies of extortion' (Kegley, 2003:72) which are aimed at altering the 'political behavior' (Baseren, 2008:3) of a state. If all these new technological developments in the field of weaponry had been accessible to a terrorist organization such as Irgun, its actions may well have resulted in a prompt positive reaction from both the British Government and the Palestinian militants, improving the chances of having a territorially wider Jewish state. It is through such examples that the extent to which late 20th and 21st century technology is making modern day groups of political violence more effective. Having analyzed some of the main utensils that contemporary terrorist organizations enjoy as a result of an increase in the processes of globalization and modernization, this paper will now proceed with the concluding arguments.

Globalization is known to be characterized by processes of 'individualization, deculturation and deterritorialization'

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(Roy in Seib, 2008: 92) which combined promote a 'reconstructed identity based on the homogenization of patterns of conduct' (ibid.). It is on these lines that the jihadist media product (Devji, 2005) of the 'unmah' functions. Observing these conceptual similarities, it should be of no surprise that religious terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda are finding it increasingly easy and effective to operate in a highly interconnected operational environment. Al-Qaeda is gaining the publicly perceived government military overreactions that the anarchists or ETA were seeking in order to gain support for their cause, and this is also because of the aid it has received from the processes of globalization. Governments in the West therefore, need to tackle not only the 'operational environment' (Jenkins, 2002: 1), such as the US and NATO military intervention in Afghanistan, but also win the media war. This can be done by increasing the reliability levels of the intelligence available (Jenkins, 2002) by regulating the media so that its 'weaponization' (Saib, 2008: 183) is prevented and by managing military operations in accordance to international law, and therefore delegitimize any group or action falling short of this global legal environment. The latter argument is of most importance to Richard Clarke who feels that the invasion of Iraq by the United States of America has been a recruitment tool for al-Qaeda (2004) and therefore a shift in policy is needed from a reactive one to an aggressive preventive one (Schmidt, 2004). Furthermore, it is only by collective action that the international community can regulate and implicitly prevent the spread of dangerous weaponry as well as the securitization of their domestic environments. These measures should provide the basics for not only countering at a global, but also domestic level, a terrorist organization such as al-Qaeda which is increasing its complexity by splitting into 'acorns' (Jenkins, 2002:4), implanted cells ready to attack, but also improve the West's chances to win the 'long war against Islamofascism' (Rogers in Williams, 2009:172).

Drawing on all the above observations it is safe to conclude that due to technological developments, but also to other processes of globalization, terrorist organizations have indeed become more effective in delivering fear to global populations. Therefore, global solutions must be demanded, preferably based on the concept of 'collective moral responsibility' (Miller, 2009:61). Proceeding toward the end, I will add it is not only globalization that has helped terrorist groups operate more efficiently as tools of political change, but also their inherited nature of a constant process of adaptation, ingenuity, and incrementalism (Norris et. al, 2003) when faced with new 'grand strategies' (Cronin, 2002-2003:56) involving improved technologies, security frameworks of targets, or counter-terrorism strategies. Certainly, this is also the case for al-Qaeda which although has failed in securing its 'safe-haven' or operational center in Afghanistan, is still successfully operating globally through all the available logistical means globalization has provided both terrorist and counter-terrorist units with (Cornish, 2010).

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The Evolution of Terrorism as a Tool of Political Change

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