



Understanding terrorism in the modern world

Terrorism can be briefly defined as the systematic use of murder, injury and destruction or threat to create a climate of terror, to publicize a cause, and to intimidate a wider target into conceding to the terrorist's aims according to P. Wilkinson. Walter Laqueur says that terrorism constitutes the illegitimate use of force to achieve a political objective when innocent people are targeted. The US state department defines terrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience'.

Terrorist groups can be identified as left wing, right wing, nationalist, state-sponsored, anarchist and religious. Terrorists do not belong to any recognized army. They don't abide the law. They don't abide the laws of conventional wars. They don't identify themselves as terrorists. They usually use terms such as 'freedom fighters', 'separatist movement', 'revolutionary organisation', 'militant', 'paramilitary', 'guerrilla movement', 'rebel group', 'Jihadi' or 'Mujaheddin'. One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Some movements or individuals who were labeled as terrorist groups/individuals by western governments are later called them as statesmen. For example, African National Congress (ANC) and its leader Nelson Mandel even won the Nobel Prize for peace. Nationalist terrorist groups seek to reunite a divisive land or liberate the people of a divisive country. In the case of nationalist terrorist groups, the government in power refers them as terrorists, but some see them as 'freedom fighters'. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Irish Republican Army (IRA), and The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) all fall under the category of nationalist terrorism.

Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida network is a clear example of religious terrorism. They use the religion to recruit, stimulate and control their supporters. State sponsored terrorism usually involves organizations that have allowed themselves to be manipulated by their own government. These terrorist groups are trained and

equipped to fight the enemies of the country. Some argue that the nations with the least terrorism are the most democratic nations. But this is not the case in all major suicide attacks in recent years. The 9/11, the London underground bombing and the 2002 Bali bombing all targeted democracies.

While we might understand the reasons for terrorism, we should also view terrorism in perspective. Some 40,000 Americans die each year as a result of gun violence while a similar number die on roads. It is clear that the 40,000 who die on American roads do not deter anyone from driving on highways. But September 11 terrorist attack on twin towers made millions decide that air travel was too dangerous! So it is profoundly obvious that the effects of a terrorist act are far more effective and very costly both in terms of human lives and the monetary cost involved. One of the main objectives of international terrorist acts like 11 September is to maximize the psychological impact on millions of people around the world. They attack national symbols to show their power and to shatter the foundation of the nation or society. For example, when the LTTE attacked the 'Dalada Maligawa' in Kandy a few years ago, it shattered the whole country. They paralyze the enemy with fear and pressure governments into their agenda. They need maximum publicity to intimidate the masses and eventually to attain its objectives. They use violence to generate fear and a well coordinated propaganda campaign to get public attention. Their message is frequently conveyed through violence. What most terrorist organizations have in common is a political purpose. It is a political tactic which they see as 'worth pursuing', otherwise the failure to do so is a worse outcome than the deaths of civilians. In the Palestine war, the failure to secure the ancestral homeland or holy site such as Israel and Jerusalem is worse than the deaths of civilians in the minds of many Hamas supporters. Terrorists target the innocent, perhaps soft targets and for victims it is a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Since 11th September, a number of politicians have linked poverty with terrorism.

Although it seems that there is a direct correlation between poverty and terrorism, the evidence does not show any direct connection. For example, the nineteen hijackers who committed the 11 September attack or Bin Laden were not poor. The driving force behind most terrorist acts are fuelled by repression, ineffective political system, race, religion or territorial disputes.

Terrorist organizations usually have multiple sources of funding on their sleeve. They raise funds both legally and illegal ways. The most common way of raising funds for these organizations is through charities registered as humanitarian organizations. For example, the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) is a registered charity but it has been identified as a main source of funding for the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Many terrorist organisations do rely on organized crimes which include kidnapping as well. International drug trafficking and robbery are other means of revenue. The world most wanted man, Osama bin Laden has invested millions in terrorism from his family fortunes in Saudi Arabia. Virtually all Islamic fundamentalist terrorism including Palestinian liberation groups (mainly Hamas and Fatah movements) have been funded by foreign countries notably Libya, Syria and Iran. Now, it is a fact beyond doubt that Iraq insurgents are trained and funded by Iran and Syria.

Today, international terrorism has



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largely been equated to the Al Qaeda movement headed by Osama bin Laden. The Al Qaeda's world wide network which is not severely disabled by post 9/11 counter-terrorism activities including mighty Afgan and Iraq wars has created the fear that future strikes might be even more deadly and employ weapons of mass destruction or what some people called 'dirty bombs'. The specific types of counter-terrorism measures that many governments have come up with are; targeted laws, deportations and enhanced police powers, preemptive military action, and increased intelligence. However, if terrorism is to be countered most effectively, the understanding of this worldwide phenomenon must go beyond these 'targeted counter-terrorist measures'. Without such a broad based understanding of 'root causes' of terrorism, particularly, the Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in the Arab world, not only will the Islamic terrorism be unstoppable, but it also risks becoming unmanageable in future.

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