

## **Why Does the Global Community Fail to Respond to Terrorism?**

### **1. Introduction**

Very few words or notions are as ambiguous and mystifying as terrorism. It may even be hard to know it when you see it and this is why the riddle gets more complicated than it initially seems. The fact that contemporary politics and international political climate qualify terrorism and terrorists as the enemies of human evolution and social development creates a somewhat ubiquitous phenomenon. Terrorism is bad and has been an encumbrance for human beings, institutions, and states. None the less, the enigmatic existence of such an enemy cannot be stopped, let alone annihilated.

The universal moaning against terrorism has never been loftier before. Leaders, politicians, social thinkers, scholars and international actors all call -on an increasing basis- for the destruction of the ill; yet, national, regional and global mechanisms are arguably unwilling but certainly powerless and incompetent to find a common cure in handling the malady. So far, we have not been aware of a globally-accepted conduct or initiative in understanding, managing, and finally exterminating terrorism as a way to convince the adversary and shamelessly leverage to one's own advantage. Moreover, considering the haphazard approaches of actors and fragmented posture of global community vis-à-vis terrorism, one hastens to get more anxious for the future because of -certainly not legitimation- but proliferation of terrorism as a replacement of conventionally-accepted methods in global arena as a result of its ability to weaken decency and appropriateness.

## **2. Diagnosis: What is missing?**

The main argument of this paper is to draw attention to one of the relatively ignored dimensions of the issue: The definition of terrorism and the lack of a global consensus which would help encompass the attitudes of governmental and nongovernmental players accordingly. Good or bad, deliberately or unintentionally, today's complex international politics does not have a globally accepted definition of terrorism. The hypocritical mantras of "my terrorist is bad, your terrorist is good" or "your terrorist is my freedom fighter" tacitly surround and limit the policy-makers in the name of attaining short-lived gains, however, fatally backlash with detrimental outcomes when the counterparty, too, exercises similar methods.

Most of all, mainly because of international political correctness, no party acknowledges that its acts fall under the limits of terrorism. Hence, deficiency of a commonly-approved terrorism definition serves no more than causing a cul-de-sac one in which the parties mutually accuse one another in violating international laws and emboldening terrorist activities. Last but not least, the lack of agreement on a terrorism definition impedes international countermeasures.

It is striking to note that even the public agencies of the same country may approach terrorism from different angles. For instance, US State Department uses its definition, contained in Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d), as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" while US Department of Defense defines it as "the unlawful use of -or threatened use of- force or violence against individuals or property to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, often to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives." It becomes obvious, then, that terrorism is a tactic and has a very broad range of implications, yet without an agreed perception of national and international agencies.

### **3. How do global governance mechanisms try to handle the problem?**

According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the first attempt to reach to an internationally acceptable definition was made under the League of Nations (1937) when terrorism described as “all criminal acts directed against a state and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or a group of persons or the general public”, however, the convention drafted never materialized. At present, there are 12 piecemeal conventions and protocols but no single comprehensive convention on terrorism. In his survey “Political Terrorism: A Research Guide”, widely credited terrorism expert Alex Schmid studied more than a hundred different definitions of terrorism but was unable to provide an exhaustive definition of the term.

Schmid’s academic definition (1988) is that “terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby -in contrast to assassination- the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperilled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought.” His simple suggestion to then UN Crime Branch in 1992, on the other hand, was that acts of terrorism were “peacetime equivalents of war crimes” with the assumption that war crimes were deliberate attacks on civilians, hostage taking and the killing of prisoners.

Bruce Hoffman (1998) argues that following the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre, in which eleven Israeli athletes were killed, then UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim originated the discussion that UN could not have a luxury to remain as a “mute spectator” to the acts of terrorist violence and had to take concrete steps in order to prevent further bloodshed. Nevertheless, a number of Arab states and various African and Asian countries argued that “people who struggle to liberate themselves from foreign oppression and exploitation have the right to use all methods at their disposal, including force.”

In its General Assembly Resolution 51/210, titled “Measures to eliminate international terrorism”, United Nations condemned “all acts, methods and practices of terrorism as criminal and unjustifiable, wherever and by whomsoever committed” and went on to reiterate that “criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them.” On March 17, 2005, a UN panel described terrorism as any act “intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.”

European Union, on the other hand, in Article 1 of the Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism (2002) describes that terrorist offenses “may seriously damage a country or an international organization where committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly compelling a government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental

political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.”

The Arab League Accord to Fight Terrorism (April 22, 1998), signed by the Interior and Justice Ministers of the 22 Arab states, was the first and most unique treaty which aimed to fight terrorism and extremism. The accord “... condemns violence and terrorism and stresses the defense of human rights and cooperation between societies for the sake of peace” and has made a “commitment to the rules of the ... UN, international law and all other related international agreements” whereas it is cautious in differentiating “between terrorist crimes and the struggle against foreign occupation and aggression, according to the principles of international law.”

International economic actors also act against terrorism and terror funding. In 2002, International Monetary Fund (IMF) listed 15 countries in an attempt to “name and shame” and included another dozen to correct their acts as a part of the so-called Non-Cooperating Countries and Territories (NCCT) process. IMF and World Bank, of which the latter in 2002 launched its own initiative to expand assistance to fragile states and increased its lending by 67 percent (Washington Post), have established a collaborative framework with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for conducting comprehensive Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) assessments of countries’ compliance with the FATF 40+8 recommendations, using a single global methodology, according to the World Bank. FATF leads the efforts to establish an international standard response against money laundering and the financing of terrorism.

Yet, despite the seemingly common rhetoric, the devil is in the details. Whereas state and non-state actors all agree on the utility of violence in its usage as a means, it is no overstating that not even a single agreement has been reached for determining as to when, by whom and at

whom the use of violence becomes legitimate. Such a complication can have an explanatory power in understanding why ad hoc coalitions or -with the recent fashion- “the coalitions of the willing” have virtually become a regular method in handling terrorist movements and dealing with those states providing sanctuaries to terrorist groups.

#### **4. Why is the world not acting with regard to the problem?**

I contend that the insufficiency of the global community in tackling the terrorism problem and formulating a generally-accepted holistic definition for it stems from three main factors; namely, political rationales, economic incentives, and philosophical and cultural differences. The cornerstone of the first one, which arguably dominates the framework, is high politics and security. The neo-realist school of thought has been the foremost forceful factor of political rationales. Accordingly, the absence of a global central power channels the states to seek for their self-interests and self-preservation. In so doing, the states attempt to respond internal and external threats as well as aggression in a system of their choice which is based on their own interpretation of international law and backed by the legitimate justification of self-help. One controversial example would be the insufficiency of Security Council in reaching consensus arising from high politics; it has consistently condemned various human rights violations and terrorist activities around the globe, yet was unable to condemn Israeli actions because of 42 US vetoes of UN resolutions since 1972 critical of Israel (Jewish Virtual Library).

If one dimension of the issue is the power game and major players' stakes, probably the other one is the notion of nation state and its sovereign rights coming all the way from the Treaty of Westphalia since 1648. Accordingly, stemming from their sovereignties and the fundamental right of political self-determination, not only are the nation states implicitly recognized as the

legitimate users of force but virtually in all of the cases assumed to be immune from accusations of terrorism; needless to say, the fact that the majority of modern -but not completely agreed- definitions in use have been put in place by governmental agencies greatly helped the states be excluded from such accusations. Once again mentioned and gallantly attributed by the realists, the Treaty and the nation-state provide a mighty foundation for today's politics.

The second factor is economic interests and incentives. Once the countries have a mutual dependence on one another, it should not be surprising when the eyes are shut in the case of doubtful violations. The connectedness of the states and economic stakes force particularly -but not necessarily- relatively weaker parties to be more acquiescent no matter how much they would be disturbed with their counterparty's questionable stance vis-à-vis terrorism. This can be proficiently illustrated in the case of state-to-state relations between major western powers which have a firm foundation of liberal democratic institutions and alleged members of undemocratic governments in the less-developed world. The strategic interaction among the actors arising from the mutual needs and the impact of self-interests represent the powerful tool of neo-liberalism. Whereas the neo-liberal institutionalists argue for many other aspects such as constitutional democracy, less proneness to war and the role of institutions, they would also draw on economics and regulate their relationships with even allegedly terrorism-supporting counterparts because of their self-interests, which in many cases conquers the principles, if there are any at all.

The final element impeding the able handling of terrorism and a globally reached consensus lies in the philosophical and cultural differences. Vastly different from a value, terrorism could be seen a means in dealing with desired outcomes. However, the lack of norms and standards -at least practically- in responding to adversaries shape the attitudes in most of the

case. Not surprisingly, there are belief systems and cultural norms which completely legitimize a set of behaviors in reacting to enemies, while questionable by some others in reaching an outcome. Modern era has made many of us witnesses of those leaders or representatives of states and nonstate groups in their callings against opponents in a totally unacceptable way of dealing with issues. Some groups with a particular origin of religion, creed, gender or background find it their natural right in exercising a given set of terrorism-alike practices even if they have appropriate justifications such as self-revival or well-documented proofs of enemies with regards to their connections with criminal activities. Repairing a mistake with another mistake, in short, becomes a standard practice arising from philosophical and cultural acceptances. Arguably the most promising cure of such a cultural perception may come from social constructivists' argument that ideas and norms play a great deal of role in shaping individuals' and societies' perceptions. If a global environment of generally-accepted understandings that are shared could be created with mutual recognition of needs and changing global conditions could be internalized by all, states and nonstate groups may well be convinced in respecting and preserving the dignity and honor of the other, no matter if it belongs to the enemy. As Barnett (2001) effectively asserts, constructivists answered the challenge of neo-realists and neo-liberal institutionalists by demonstrating "how unpacking state interests and imagining the constitution of actors' identities, interests, and capacities would matter for illuminating fundamental issues surrounding war and peace, and cooperation and conflict."



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