

Terrorism in historical perspective

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Terrorism is the defining issue of the post 9/11 world. It is also one of the most confusing and contested words in the political lexicon. The route to understanding, says Fred Halliday, is through making connections: between past and present, state and insurgent violence, nationalist and religious movements. The result is an incisive, rewarding survey of terrorism's history, current impact, and possible future.

The confusion of our times

The spring of 2004 has brought forth monsters. The Madrid bombings, Gaza assassinations, Kosovo killings, Ugandan massacres, Iraqi depredations, Sudanese persecutions remind the world – if it was ever tempted to forget – that the defining issue of the 21st century is the question of political violence and its causes.

Much of this political violence can be categorised as “terrorism”, and all of it is a recognisable exemplar of that toxic, multi-layered, and ultimately indispensable term. Its employment demands extreme care and discrimination, as well as awareness of its potential for misuse, but the pressing realities of our time force on us the responsibility to make it an instrument of enlightenment and understanding.

Terrorism is a complex issue that allows of no easy resolution, intellectual or political. Indeed, probably no subject has been as important in international relations, or as confused in its treatment. Yet never has clear exposition been more necessary; for since September 2001 it has been the defining issue in

American foreign policy, and, by extension to much of the discussion of foreign policy in Europe, the Eurasian landmass, the Middle East and elsewhere.

Terrorism is not a specifically “Middle Eastern” or “Islamic” problem. Historically, the continent of Europe pioneered political violence on a world scale, developed modern industrial war, and played the leading role in developing those particular instruments of modern political action and control: genocide, systematic state torture, and terrorism.

Today, Europeans are right to feel that their own lives, their psychological tranquillity, their flawed but nonetheless substantial liberal and democratic values are under threat, and will remain so for years to come. An age of innocence – born of the expanding prosperity of the European Union over five decades, and the end of the cold war since 1991 – has come to an end, if not on 11 September 2001 then on 11 March 2004.

But we should never forget that it was Europe which led the world in the uses of political violence, and that terrorism, and the fear it generates, are worldwide

concerns. One can understand why so many politicians in Spain and beyond talk of the Madrid attacks as an attack on European values, and why the European parliament passed a resolution the day after the Madrid explosions, for a “European day against terrorism”. But these are partial, mistaken, responses: we who are Europeans also bare responsibility for such phenomena.

More importantly, it is not just Europeans, nor indeed Americans, who are the targets of terrorism, but also all those in the Middle East and elsewhere who stand against this totalitarian and fanatical, but determined and patient, enemy. The problem belongs, and will belong for a long time, to the entire world. We should frame our responses – security, political and moral – in these terms.

The global character of the terror problem is essential to realise for another reason: the darker side of globalisation that liberal optimism too easily forgets. Beyond the prosperous west, there is a world that is, and feels itself to be, deprived of the benefits of modern life. If there is one fact above all that western informed opinion has to take into account it is what can be termed “global rancour”: the enormous, and ever-expanding, divide between the developed west, and the large areas of crisis and anger that surround it – in the Middle East, Latin America, Africa and Asia.

This need to understand this point is highlighted by the first of successive assassinations in Gaza in recent weeks of leaders of the Palestinian militant group Hamas. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was at war with Israel and had long accepted his fate. He was also a hero to his own people, and is now so to Muslims across the world for two reasons that go to the heart of the anger of poor people in the non-west.

First, he resisted foreign occupation and arrogance. Second, he was a political leader who was personally honest. Like Ayatollah Khomeini and Fidel Castro, he had no villas in Geneva, no secret bank accounts, no bevy of attractive young women, and no abstruse, alien, political rhetoric. For millions, he was a simple, honest, courageous man and respected as such, even if his tactics towards others were inhuman and criminal.

Israel’s action has made him a hero for Muslims worldwide, including those in the European diaspora,

and the response will be terrible and sustained. The date of his assassination, 22 March 2004, may well in retrospect mark a turning point in the history of the Middle East, and in particular of the now even more vulnerable Jewish state, than 11 September 2001.

We cannot yet know – just as we cannot be sure whether al-Qaida’s Manhattan and Pentagon operation will in the course of time prove to have been a “world-historical” but essentially one-off event, as in different ways were the financial crash of 1929, the atomic bombs of 1945, and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. But about 9/11 we can affirm one thing above all: this was a *political* event, not an act of providence, divine or fatal, nor an expression of irrationality or atavistic religion.

The attacks on 11 September 2001 were, like the Madrid attacks and the other events mentioned at the start of this article, the product of particular, identifiable, political factors – rooted in the recent history of the Middle East, of the cold war and its aftermath, or a combination of both. And it is the interplay of these factors in the years to come that will determine the future. Whether there will be more dates codified as “9/11” or “11-M”, whether the constellation of forces around al-Qaida will be able to sustain their campaign, and whether

this event will come to define and poison the broader pattern of relations between the west and the Muslim world – these are questions capable of yielding to political calculation, judgment, and choice.

In other words, part of their answer will lie where the political violence itself began, in the very contingency of politics – leadership, events, power struggles, and the longer-term consequences of actions by state and non-state forces alike.

Behind this political determination of the future, however, lies the political disempowerment of ordinary citizens. To a far greater degree than in major wars – when citizens are mobilised on the front or behind the lines – most of the inhabitants and citizens of the world are reduced to mere spectators in the current wars *on* terror and *by* terror. They are unable to participate in any meaningful way in their outcomes.

Thus, they (we) are prisoners not just of their (our) individual powerlessness, the occasional vote or protest meeting aside, but of the very nature of *this*

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conflict. For it is not only a secret, military, battle. It is also one where feelings, myths, confused sentiments struggle to articulate themselves in public discourse, and where the sense of everyday security in the private lives of families and individuals is thwarted or undermined by large, impersonal forces they strain to understand.

It is precisely out of this “universalisation” of the human condition in the age of terror and its wars, however, that some margin of participation, of debate, and of critical reflection is not only made possible but is also the active responsibility of those who have studied and reflected on the character of political violence in the current era. It is in this spirit – of belief in democratic political agency by citizens, even as serious, long-term challenges increasingly become the condition of all our existences – that I propose this brief mapping of the lessons of the post-9/11 world.

The modernity of terrorism

“Terrorism” is too easily elided in contemporary political discussion with the general phenomenon of armed resistance to oppression by states. This latter activity has been a major feature of the modern world, especially in situations of domination by western or colonial powers. It has included, in more recent times, the activities of the African National Congress (ANC) against the apartheid regime in South Africa as well as the Palestinian Liberation organisation (PLO) in Palestine, the guerrillas in Afghanistan, both the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) and the *Contra* in Nicaragua.

The general right to resist, and, where extreme coercion exists, to take up arms, is generally recognised both in law and in modern political discourse: it was the basis for the Reaganite backing of revolt against communist third world regimes (Angola, Grenada, Mozambique) in the 1980s as it was of communist backing for wars of national liberation in the 1950s and 1960s.

This right is also a precious part of the legacy of political reflection, in west and in east, over many centuries. The Christian legal and political tradition gave due respect to this principle. It was also espoused by the English philosopher John Locke, the “founding fathers” in the United States of America, and currents of radical dissent in the age of empire and enlightenment.

It is equally present in Islamic discourse, where revolt – often referred to as *khuruj* (literally “going out” against the tyrant), *dhalim*, *taghin*, or

musta’bid – is central to the tradition. In the minds of hegemonic powers, and particularly in US discussion after 9/11, the right to revolt has been generally omitted; many non-western states have been quick to take local advantage of a global trend by crushing internal dissent (with indulgence from Washington) on the grounds that it too is all “terrorism”.

Terrorism is a distinct political and moral phenomenon, though of course interlinked with the issue of revolt and opposition to oppression. Terrorism refers to a set of military tactics that are part of military and political struggle, and which are designed to force the enemy to submit by some combination of killing and intimidation.

As such it is deemed to be a violation of the rules and norms of warfare, in either of two senses. First, where these are formally encoded, as in the Geneva Conventions and their two Additional Protocols of 1977, the latter of which cover (albeit inadequately) irregular and terrorist actions. Second, where they exist informally, in relation to what are considered legitimate means of waging war. These are notoriously vague, and permit (especially in situations of nationalist or religious fervour) partisan interpretations, but they are also remarkably resilient and universal: the killings of women and children, of prisoners, or of groups of civilians are actions widely recognised in all cultures, religions and contexts as invalid in principle.

The first use of “terrorism” was by the French revolutionaries, in an exact reverse of the contemporary sense: to denote violence *against* a people *by* the state. It was also used thus by the Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky in a book published in English as *In Defence of Terrorism*.

This dimension should not be forgotten. In recent decades, states have killed and tortured far more people and violated far more of the rules of war than their “non-state” opponents. This recognition of the prevalence and criminality of “state” terrorism should, however, be maintained in distinction from two other issues: first, “state-sponsored” terrorism, which has come to denote the support for terrorist, and more broadly guerrilla, activity by one state on the territory, and/or against the officials and citizens of another; second, the responsibility of opposition groups in revolt (legitimate or not) against dictatorial states themselves to respect the norms of war – for their defenders all too easily resort to an (often justified) attack on *state* terrorism to distract attention from the crimes of their own side.

This early history of terrorism, as both term and political phenomenon, casts some light on the present crisis and the “war” against terrorism. The rise of “non-state” terror, espoused as a conscious political activity – for propaganda more than for actual state-challenging reasons – dates mainly from a century later; nationalist movements in Ireland, Armenia, Bengal are exemplary here. Russian anarchists also deployed this tactic.

In the post-1945 period, “terrorism from below” came most to be associated with third world struggles against a colonial power deemed to be too powerful to confront on the battlefield alone, but with a political vulnerability at home: the Zionist *Irgun*, the Algerian FLN, the Kenyan Mau Mau, the Cypriot EOKA, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Basque ETA – though not, significantly, Vietnam.

Only in the late 1960s did the main incidences of such activity shift to the Middle East, with guerrillas in Palestine, Iran, Eritrea resorting to attacks on civilians, hijacking of airlines, kidnapping of politicians and ordinary civilians alike. But it is worth noting that these were groups inspired by secular, and often radical or self-proclaimedly “Marxist-Leninist” ideologies. Religious groups, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, and the Fedayeen-i Islam in Iran, did carry out selected assassinations of secular intellectuals or political opponents, but these were specifically targeted actions, not part of a broader social and political mobilisation to take power.

Much has been made, in the light of 11 September, of the relationship between religion, in this case Islam, and acts of terror. But an element of robust and (in the proper sense, denoting a field of scholarship) “orientalist” comparison is pertinent here. *All* religions contain the bases of respect for general norms of behaviour in war, but they also contain elements that can be used for massacre, ethnic expulsion, and the slaying of prisoners. The Judeo-Christian Bible, notably Deuteronomy and Judges, provide good examples of this. It is indisputable that there are elements in the texts and traditions of Islamic peoples that can be assembled to make the modern device of political terrorism – but this is not a necessary, or singular, connection.

The key implication is that “terrorism”, as ideology and instrument of struggle, is a *modern* phenomenon, a product of the conflict between contemporary states and their restive societies. It has developed, in rich and

poor countries alike, as part of a transnational model of political engagement. Its roots are in modern secular politics; it has no *specific* regional or cultural attachment; it is an instrument, one among several, for those aspiring to challenge states and, one day, to take power themselves.

The challenge of al-Qaida

The ideology, strategy and tactics of al-Qaida certainly have distinct aspects, and are not a mere extension of this earlier history. Whether it is seen as a single act of “terror from below”, an extreme case of “propaganda of the deed”, or as a blow against a metropolitan, first-world city by a third-world movement, no action like 11 September 2001 was ever carried out before. It was, amazingly, the first time in 500 years of unequal, globalised, north-south interaction and conflict that such an event has occurred.

Al-Qaida itself is, moreover, not just another, conventional, modern terrorist organisation. Its ideology is an extreme case of hybridity, borrowing as it does some elements from *Sunni* Islam, others from *Sunni* sectarianism against *Shi'a* Muslims, and mixing both with modern nihilism, the cult of extreme heroism, self-sacrifice and the gun, anti-globalisation rhetoric and, not least, nationalism. Like Nazism, it is an ideology that thrives on its intoxicating incoherence.

In organisational terms, it clearly has a structure distinct from that of the Popular front for the liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) or ETA. At its core is a small, conspiratorial, group, led by Osama bin Laden and his Egyptian companion, Ayman al-Zawahiri; around them are small, semi-independent groups, drawn from many different parts of the Muslim and non-Muslim world.

Their approach is a result of two, mutually reinforcing characteristics. First, a rational calculation that decentralised networks, active in fund-raising and recruiting, are more resistant to penetration. Second, a cultural adaptation of the loose patterns of association, trust and commitment that characterise societies, like Afghanistan and parts of the Arab world, where tribal patterns of behaviour to some degree still prevail.

The other key element in understanding al-Qaida, one that takes the focus right back to modernity and the historical context in which it emerged, is the cold war, in particular its latter phase from the 1979 Soviet

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intervention in Afghanistan onwards. Without the cold war, and without lavish United States and Saudi support for the opposition guerrillas in Afghanistan, neither al-Qaida nor the whole transnational world of Islamic fighters would have come into existence.

Years before al-Qaida started attacking western targets in New York (1993) and Africa (1998), they were on the rampage in Afghanistan and Yemen, killing secular officials, intellectuals and opponents of their fundamentalist project. In challenging these two pro-Soviet Islamic third world regimes, where (in a benighted way) reformist communist states were trying to push through a secular, modernising, programme, the west and its regional allies turned too easily to the crazed counter-revolutionaries of the Islamic right.

No historical analysis, and, indeed, no measured settling of moral accounts about 9/11 and what follows, can avoid this earlier, decisive, connection. Al-Qaida hates the west, but it is a creation – an ideological, militarised and organisational monster – of western policy in the cold war itself. On 11 September 2001 the sorcerer's apprentice hit back. Given a chance, it will hit back again.

The way ahead: four guidelines

No one can anticipate how the campaigns of al-Qaida, and of those waging the “war against terrorism”, will unfold. It will take years for this crisis to pass, and, in contrast to conventional wars, there will be no moment at which the war, or indeed the *jihad*, will clearly be over. Citizens, in east or west, are and will remain spectators in this conflict. But they (we) can take a stand, make judgments, and attempt to influence policy.

In conclusion, then, here are four proposed guidelines for discussion by concerned citizens worldwide.

First, terrorism of all kinds should be condemned. At the same time, a broader sense of proportion is needed. No discussion of terrorism from below, or its history or its moral and legal dimensions, can take place without parallel recognition of the role of states, past and present, in violating the rules of war with regard to the treatment of civilians and prisoners.

This is a point that some recent terrible events in the Balkans, Indonesia and Rwanda have all too clearly underlined. By far the greater number of political deaths has always been caused by the actions of states. There is no reason to believe this will change in the early 21st century.

Second, we need to bear in mind, and with some self-critical modesty, the fact that the major governments of the west have themselves, in recent times, supported

groups that are, on any objective standard, “terrorist”. Examples are legion, from Unita in Angola, which killed hundreds of thousands in the wars that lasted from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, to the Nicaraguan *Contra*, the right-wing governments of El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s, and above all the Afghan *mujahideen*.

While the worst crimes have certainly been committed by radical regimes that were opposed to the west (Iraq, Syria, Iran), few states in the Middle East that have been allies of the west – not Israel or Turkey, not Egypt or Saudi Arabia, not (in its earlier days) the Shah's Iran – have upheld standards of law and norms in regard to the treatment of civilians and subject peoples.

In short, no discourse and no policy that casts al-Qaida as the sole, or main, violator of the rules of war, in a conflict with something that calls itself without qualification “the civilised world”, is defensible.

Third, resistance to terror is not a prerogative of powerful western states. Terror, from below and above, has been the experience of many peoples in the third world over decades, well before 9/11 – be it in Lebanon or Israel, Sri Lanka or Pakistan, Indonesia or Cambodia, Sierra Leone or Rwanda, Argentina or Guatemala, and, not to be forgotten, Ireland or Spain.

The victims who died in Manhattan fell in the shadow of thousands of others: intellectuals and peasants, priests and village leaders, trades unionists and student leaders, and (in Afghanistan in particular) proponents of women's rights, who had been slain, their families and friends terrorised and dispersed. This is a phenomenon with a very wide toll, and on every continent.

This does not preclude the citizens of the United States from expressing their grief and anger, but it should remind them that they permanently exist in relation to a worldwide movement that has deep roots, to which the US itself contributed during the cold war – and that they are *part of* this movement, not its singularised and unappointed *master*.

Thus, the opposition to bin Laden cannot be based on some privilege of suffering on 11 September, any more than can the victims of a car accident or a violent theft claim a unique experience that entitles them to pursue vengeance in disregard of established norms. There is also no supposedly pure, western, record in regard to the role of violence and terror over the past century: recall (for example) the millions killed by the Belgians in the Congo around 1900, or the millions slaughtered by France and the US in Vietnam between 1945 and 1975, in the name of causes that were later abandoned.

Fourth, the fight against terrorism, on any continent and within any political or cultural context, involves a necessary security dimension. But it *also* involves historical perspective, political astuteness and the defence of those standards in the name of which the fight is itself being conducted.

In other words, those who wage the fight must themselves respect law and show some element of historical modesty and perspective. This is all the more so because “terrorism”, like “globalisation”, “human rights” and relations between “civilisations” (not an analytic category I generally favour) is debated and understood through the nexus of existing world power relations.

There is, moreover, no calm, level realm for discussion of these topics. For this world is characterised by long-established and growing inequalities of power and wealth, against a background of centuries of colonial expansion, clientelist protection of oppressive regional regimes, and cold war intervention. So these topics have to be posed, debated, and understood in a context where – put bluntly – the majority of the world’s population, including the over one billion Muslims in the world, regard the intentions and policies of the west, particularly the US, with deep distrust.

This historic fact must inform, even if it does not completely alter, the formulation of policy towards the non-west today, including those countries where terrorism is said to be an issue. At the root of this phenomenon of “globalised rancour” lies an issue that also lies at the heart of terrorism: respect, or lack of it, for the views and humanity of others.

Here, across the violent canvas of modernity, imperialism and terrorism have joined hands, forcing their policies and views onto those unable to protect themselves, and proclaiming their world-historical virtue in the name of some political goal or project that *they alone* have defined. Terrorism can only be defeated if this central arrogance – one as evident in the subjugation of Asia, the Middle East and Africa around a century ago as it is in the cruel and deliberate blowing up of civilians in night clubs, restaurants and shops today – is overcome. This has all very little to do

with different religions, or cultures, even if the issues can be phrased in various ways and languages.

The central challenge facing the world in the face of 9/11 and all the other terrorist acts preceding and following it, is to create a global order that defends security while also making real the aspirations to equality and mutual respect that modernity itself has aroused and proclaimed but has spectacularly failed so far to fulfil.

Terrorism, then, is a world problem in cause and in impact. It should be addressed in a global, cosmopolitan, context. Europe will probably be again its victim, but it is also historically and morally a contributor to this abuse of political opposition, and an architect of political violence.

All human beings, European or not, are locked into a conflict that will endure for decades, the outcome of which is not certain. In engaging with it, citizens need five things: a clear sense of history; recognition of the reality of the danger; steady, intelligent, political leadership; the building of mass support within European and global society for resistance to this new and major threat; and above all, our best defense, a commitment to liberal and democratic values.

The Irish poet W.B. Yeats wrote in *The Second Coming* (1921):

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”

We must, and can still, prove him wrong. The future – just – remains open.

This article is based on a talk at Goodenough House in November 2003, organised by the Goodenough Trust. A version of it will appear in a book entitled Terrorism: Challenge of the 21st Century? to be published later in 2004

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