

ORIENTALISM AND TERRORISM

The War on Terrorism

Introduction

1. Background
2. Main Problematic of Terrorism. Two observations:
 1. The entire topic is politicized beyond recovery (the term no longer carries the same moral weight)
 2. In more than 90-95% of the time, terrorism occurs in a context that involves at least one of two things
 - a. A conflict over **territory/land** where “foreign military personnel” are present.
 - b. A **state** is involved in some measure, either as military occupier, or as purveyor of soldiers on foreign land (e.g., military base, etc.), or supportive of an oppressive entity (which is usually another state)

The problem is that we have been trying to deal with individual and group terrorism without considering how, in the overwhelming majority of cases, various forms of state violence or control are involved in creating or perpetuating the context within which individual and group violence or terrorism emanates initially. (IRA, ETA, Tamil Tigers, Hamas, Hizballah, Jihad, Iraqi Insurgency).

Without the analytical, moral, and behavioral courage necessary to consider the relationship between state violence and individual/group violence, no end is in sight for the problematic of terrorism.

Terrorism, as we define it today, is intimately connected to state violence. To address it without considering the impact of various forms of state violence is to “run in place.” Counter-terrorism must involve many more elements than military/coercive means for it to yield long-term results. However, some of these elements are simply not possible in the current structure of international relations where states determine legality.

So, the solution is not dependent on the production of better counter-terrorism *ideas* provided by this or this critical politician or academic. It involves *structure*.

The Intersection Between the Analytical and Practical Dimensions

These are 5 basic questions whose answers constitute a blueprint for understanding one's worldview on "terrorism" and "the war on terrorism" (i.e., one's discourse)

1. What is terrorism?
2. Is there a distinction between:
 - a. State terrorism vs. individual/group terrorism
 - b. Terrorism and Resistance
 - c. Groups that are accused of terrorism
3. What are the causes of terrorism?
4. Is there a relationship between Arab/Islamic culture and violence?
5. What is the war on terrorism? And how best to fight it?

2. The War on Terrorism

Clearly, the “War on Terrorism” was launched after the attacks of September 11th, 2001 (9/11 henceforth). It was ascertained that al-Qa`ida, housed by the Taliban in Afghanistan, was the culprit.

A war was launched against Taliban’s Afghanistan to capture and destroy that regime and its protégé, al-Qa`ida. Even though the occupation of Afghanistan was not necessary, it was still accepted, even if grudgingly, in the United States and some parts of the Arab world—for fear of a re-grouping. Up to that point, the effort that came to be called “counter-terrorism” had tremendous legitimacy domestically and internationally. But that was the apex, the high point from which the “War on Terrorism,” as a discourse at least, experienced constant decline to this day.

What ensued in the following years after the occupation of Afghanistan, however, was not only a response to the perpetrators of this horrific crime against humanity, nor was it a response to all perpetrators of terrorism. It was both broader than the original culprit and narrower than the professed general target that is called “terrorism” (or “terrorists”).

The intent here is not to chronicle the “War on Terrorism,” but to (1) elucidate the *elements* that formed that discourse and to attempt to trace both its (a) *origins* and its (b) *effects* (counter-terrorism), as well as to (2) examine *the mechanism(s)* by which the ideas therein were disseminated, popularized, and made the dominant basis of taking democratically formulated action.

Portrayal of Problem and Causes (Summary)

A Preface to Discussing the War on Terrorism

Terrorism is a tactic, a method, but the “War on Terrorism” reified “terrorism.” This complicates matters because it makes setting parameters open-ended. Also, it allows for a convenient conversion: in fighting a method, one appears to be fighting on principle, not on interest. (compare the “Islamic Threat” of the 1990s to the “Terrorist” threat of the 2000s—the “fight” against the “green” Islamic threat couldn’t have been fought on principle, but the “fight” against terrorism, whatever the real objective, can be fought on principle)

Portrayal of the War and Terrorism

The conflict was generally portrayed as a fight against the enemies of civilization (or variations there-of). These portrayals can be easily accessed from primary sources including government documents and officials’ statements/speeches.

In summary, the conflict was

(a) viewed in an ideological manner, first and foremost,

and it was

(b) too widely cast.

Portrayal of Causes

We have been discussing this for some time now. The portrayal of causes in the dominant discourse stemmed from the portrayal of the conflict. In discussing causes (when causes were an explicit topic), the dominant discourse emphasized cultural rather than political variables. Such diagnosis shaped counter-terrorism strategies at various levels of governmental agencies for at least 4-5 years after 9/11. Analytically, it led to the creation of categories (of actors, actions, positions, permissible(s), etc.) that corresponded more to the portrayal than to the real world (of actors, actions, positions, etc.). Mamdani's "culture talk" and discussion of "good Muslim/bad Muslim" is a solid example of how Muslims were categorized as good/bad based on their concurrence with the "War on Terror" (with "our" policies) rather than with anything substantive about Islam or even their behavior (whether they engage in violence/terrorism or not).

Hence, the portrayal of the problem and the causes stemmed more from interest than analysis, and the portrayal of causes emphasized cultural variables rather than political variables (as the motive for violence/terrorism).

The Shift

Beginning in 2006, in some circles at the apex of counter-terrorism agencies/entities, we begin to see a scaling back in the inclusion of ideological/civilizational/cultural elements in portraying and discussing terrorism. This shift has produced some changes in the manner counter-terrorism is carried out on the margins of the "conflict," but not at its core (i.e., more in terms of *process* and less in terms of *structure*, more in terms of *tactics* and less in terms of *strategy*, more in terms of *style/language* and less in terms of *concepts*)

3. Counter Terrorism and Its Impact on the Region and Beyond

A Preface to Discussing the Impact of Counter-Terrorism

One of the most significant observations about the war on terrorism is the fact that many assume that it does not interfere with what is repeatedly called “terrorism.” It is as though terrorism is a passive disease that emerges and develops naturally and ahistorically without any kind of influence from external stimuli, as opposed to being a strategy that was initiated precisely as a response to external stimuli (legitimately or not—that is not the issue here); it is thought of as a sickness, one that we try to eliminate or cure, in this case, by waging a war against it, assuming that it will not be influenced by this war.

What is being missed is that once certain entities are consistently attacked under the rubric of a “war” based on the accusation that they have pursued terrorist tactics, the ensuing response and, later, cycle of violence, transforms the nature of the conflict. It is no longer a war on terrorism: it is simply an asymmetric confrontation between those involved.

This explains why the war on terrorism has become confined to those “fighting back” or being militarily targeted—as opposed to the original list that was drawn up, which included many more groups that were deemed “terrorist.”

One of the main reasons groups employ terrorist tactics is to bring attention to their cause by bloodying the nose of their usually more mighty political foe. Hence, the response by a powerful country under a banner of a “war” on terrorism helps such groups achieve their objective of bringing attention to their cause in an unforeseen manner, one that surpasses all expectations. Therefore, the conflict that results, especially if protracted, can no longer be depicted as a “war on terrorism.” It is simply an asymmetric war. And if it is a war, it should be judged and construed as such, with all the legal implications of conducting a war applying to all parties.

Empirical Consequences of Counter-Terrorism (as it has been conducted since 2001)

- a. Increased what we consider to be terrorist acts, casualties of terrorism, and proliferation of al-Qa`idah-type networks/groups
- b. Bolstered Islamic fundamentalism and extremism in the region (in the mainstream)
- c. Bolstered non-state actors, especially, of the Islamist variety (Hamas, Hizballah)
- d. Weakened secular *and* moderate Islamist groups/parties as it shifted the emphasis from opposition to authoritarian rule in the Arab world to opposing a perceived “Western” onslaught on Arab/Muslim identity
- e. The Iraq war and our response to Islamist electoral victories exposed “democracy promotion” as a self-interested process (democracy is good when we like outcome)—not only to perennial critics, but even to centrists
- f. Brought back the formula that prevailed between 1991 (after the collapse of the USSR) and 2001 (September 11th attacks): Essentially, we are not interested in promoting either democratic or authoritarian regimes. We are interested in promoting compliant regimes in the Middle East—if they happen to be more democratic, then all the better.
- g. Diminished our credibility and moral power in the region and globally as we continue to use force and support the use of force to achieve our objectives (as opposed to a combination of moral power, deterrence, and force as a last resort)

Psychological and Political Cultural Consequences

- a. Deepened the sense of injustice among large groups of the population (*BUT*, those with Islamist leanings were more affected to the extent they viewed the WOT as an assault on Islam, Muslims, and Muslim countries).
- b. Further blurred the distinction between civilians and combatants, conceptually and theoretically (partly because of a process of dehumanization on perceived moral and political grounds, and partly as a response to the mass killing of civilians in Iraq under the banner of “collateral damage.”)
- c. A deepening of a sense of powerlessness as local, regional, and international pressure/oppression (real or perceived) take a toll on populations.
 - The reactions differ, not along religious/sectarian lines, but along lines of compliance vs. resistance (which is why we see strange bedfellows).
 - Within the “Resistance” category (dubbed “radical” or “extremist” by our administration) we can divide groups/responses into those that take up violence and those who don’t. (and so on). Only here can we productively look at the nature of the groups (whether secular or Islamist, nationalist or leftist)

4. The War on Terrorism Today

The Discourse of the War on Terrorism (abating)

Transformation from a WOT that characterized the conflict in terms of “clash of civilizations” or a cultural war (between a culture of life and freedom on the one hand and a culture of death and subjugation on the other)

The ebb and flow of the discourse is a function of many variables, including:

- Absence of attacks in the United States
- All major off-shore attacks in the West were connected to the Iraq war (London and Madrid)
- The post-9-11 psychological effect subsiding
- Failure of US policies abroad (Iraq, Afghanistan, “Democracy Promotion,” Pakistan’s leadership change, unconditional support to Israel in both wars in/on Lebanon and Gaza), the failure of the Cedar Revolution, the containment of Syria, the implication of Iran)
- Near Absence Domestic non-terrorism related crises/catastrophes

However, the infrastructure of terrorism remains alive and well:

The Infrastructure of the War on Terrorism (grows constantly, or to a constant)

- Legal
- Institutional
- Financial
- Military
- Practice/Profiling
- “Analytical” Infrastructure (Think Tanks, Academic Programs/Centers, Civil Society Initiatives)
- Commodity Market

Questions:

What explains this schism? (discourse abating, infrastructure developing)

Where is the “War on Terrorism” going under the new administration?