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**Conceptualizing Terrorism:  
Perspective from the Periphery**

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## **Introduction**

This paper offers a conceptual framework for terrorism, one that is not necessarily in contradiction with mainstream, predominantly Western, perspective on the subject but clarifies some of its most controversial aspects including the role of religion in the current wave of terrorism, the action-reaction and terrorism-versus-freedom debates, terrorism's distinctive character as compared to war and guerrilla war and its implications for international law and state structure, as well as the root-causes of terrorism and their significance in counter-terrorism. However, overtime, mainstream perspectives seem to accommodate peripheral concerns on the subject. This is my first conclusive argument. My second argument, pertaining to the conference theme on the link between IR theory and practice, is that a hotchpotch of neo-realist and neo-liberal preferences explains the international conduct in the War on Terror, even though the present trend indicates a shift from exercising the realistically-grounded use of force option towards employing non-military means as part of a pragmatic outlook conforming to neo-liberal agenda.

The pages ahead describe where I agree with the mainstream perspective on terrorism, what my major criticism is of the mainstream perspective on the subject, why I think this perspective is accommodating peripheral concerns on terrorism, and, finally, how the conduct of the War on Terror reflects a mix of neo-realist and neo-liberal theories, and why I believe the emerging trend of the war shows a tilt towards international counter-terrorism policies rooted in neo-liberal theories.

## **Points of Agreement**

There are five areas where I fundamentally share the mainstream Western perspective on terrorism.

First, as far as the definitional difficulty of terrorism is concerned, there is no doubt about terrorism being a deliberate and organized violent activity by non-state actors against unarmed people that is motivated largely by political goals, as Samuel Huntington also finally confessed in his U-turn from Clash of Civilizations thesis in a Newsweek article published soon after 9/11.

Second, since only the state has the right to use of force, the legitimacy of politically-motivated violence against state security forces by a non-state organization is questionable, especially in instances where unarmed civilians are a simultaneous target.

Third, there is no moral or legal justification for killing unarmed civilians. That some conflicts remain unresolved does not give an individual or a group the right to make no distinction between the armed and the unarmed or kill any people in response to some specific policy practiced by their state. Almost all Western scholars on terrorism articulate this point of view.

Forth, the popular notion of “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’ is fundamentally flawed, since it confuses the goal of freedom with the means of terrorism. Terrorism is an activity which can be employed in the course of a freedom struggle. Leonard Weinberg and others have articulated this point extensively.

Fifth, non-state terrorism cannot be justified as merely a response to state terrorism, since in most instances of current terrorist activity the initiative is in the hands of terrorist organization and the states are mostly responding to it. Weinberg offers a different explanation for the purpose, which I do not subscribe to.

### **Points of Disagreement**

My criticism of the mainstream, Western perspective on terrorism revolves around four thematic issues.

First, I strongly believe that in the current wave of international terrorism, religion is largely acting as a means rather than an end. The short-term and long-term goals of al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations are essentially political. Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, except for terrorism committed by Jewish Zealots against Romans and Assassins against Abbasids, terrorism committed by deviant cults of Christianity, Judaism and Islam motivated by messianic expectations, and by a Hindu cult for sacrificial reasons, could be described as having primarily religious ends. In the current wave of terrorism, religion acts as a goal only in the cases of some doomsday Christian cults, or by deviant Muslim organizations guided by a violent jihad spirit for martyrdom. Given the essentially political nature of international terrorism involving deviant Muslims and distorted Islam, drawing a strict distinction between secular terror and religious terror to prove the lethality of religious terror on the basis of evil-versus-good thesis, as Bruce Hoffman does, is somewhat illogical. Portrayal of religion as a goal is a simplification that undermines the essentially political nature of current

terrorism and, consequently, prevents the adoption of counter-terrorism policies to tackle terrorism politically.

Second, the tendency of mainstream Western scholars to deliberately evade the issue of state terrorism amounts to overlooking an important aspect of the subject. Most textbooks on terrorism include a paragraph or two on state terrorism, either saying the issue will be a subject of another volume or restricting its narration to only state-sponsored terrorism. That is why the definitions of terrorism by Western governments and academics end mostly by mentioning only non-state actors as perpetrators of terrorism or, in some instances, altogether excluding the reference to perpetrators. In some cases, the absence of terrorism in authoritarian states, despite their repressive character, and the prevalence of terrorism in democratic states, despite their provision of avenues for peaceful resolution of conflicts, is argued, as Weinberg does, to reject the idea that non-state terrorism is a reaction to state terrorism. However, in practice, one of the reasons for non-state terrorist activity is not because the targeted country is democratic internally but because it practices a specific foreign policy disliked by the terrorist organization.

A third criticism I have of the mainstream, Western perspective on terrorism is when clear-cut distinctions are made between terrorism on the one hand, and war and guerrilla warfare on the other. The comparative specificity of terrorism as a politically motivated violence is defended on the basis of its psychological effect. However, the fact is that the boundaries among terrorism, war and guerrilla warfare are blurred, as the means employed and the target, even with respect to psychological impact, could be similar. The Second World War is a testimony to state forces deliberately

engaging in activities to terrorize the target population. The uniqueness of terrorism committed by non-state actors to the extent of deliberately targeting only unarmed civilians may be true—as the modus operandi of al-Qaeda suggests, and which qualifies it to be branded as a terrorist organization. However, to argue that soldiers or guerrillas do not practice terrorism at all is questionable. Some revolutionary guerrilla organizations in Latin America, for instance, did commit terrorism in the initial stages of their movement to popularize their cause and win more recruits from a population sympathetic to their revolutionary goals. The African National Congress's struggle against apartheid system in South Africa also involved some terrorist activity. Unduly highlighting the psychological effect of terrorism—which should last longer in peaceful parts of the West than in violent regions of the East—amounts to overlooking the more destructive nature of wars, civil wars, or regional conflicts in both human and material terms.

Fourth, mainstream writers on terrorism make a passing reference to the resolution of regional conflicts, and, therefore, fail to understand the larger historical and situational context in which terrorist violence occurs. This is not to say that somehow I agree with the organized murder of civilians by a terrorist organization on the pretext of the continuingly unresolved nature of the conflict. The basic point is that as long as a conflict, such as Kashmir or Palestine, remains unresolved for long, there will always be desperate individuals or groups engaging in morally reprehensible and legally unjustifiable acts of violence against civilians of the hated political authority. Each context of terrorism is specific, and it cannot be generalized, as Hasan Askari Rizvi also argues. I believe that abstract articulation of a complex

phenomenon premised on lofty ideals of preserving freedom or democracy often lead to the adoption of inherently counter-productive counter-terrorism policies, whose manifestations in the reckless employment of military instrument and its horrific consequences we have seen in the case of Afghan and Iraq war. Non-state terror groups thrive on the non-resolution of regional conflicts.

### **Convergence of Perspectives**

However, slowly but surely, I see greater reflection of peripheral concerns in the mainstream Western literature on terrorism. The period immediately after the terrorist incidents of 9/11 in the United States clearly showed an emotional, reactionary and propagandist streak in Western official and private discourse on terrorism—reflected largely in the depiction of Islam as a terrorist religion, Muslims as terrorists and terrorists as evil-mongers and mentally deranged people. This may have made sense, as what was threatened was the invincibility of a historically insular, less threatened, sole superpower. A population used to peaceful and liberal lifestyle can be expected to react emotionally and irrationally if it perceives or made to perceive, that this very lifestyle is in danger. However, the very fact that Western societies are internally representative of an egalitarian creed meant that over time a forceful public reaction against the abuse of prisoners in Abu Gharaib and Guantanamo Bay had to rise to press for a shift in the conduct of the War on Terror. We also need to understand that prior to the events of 9/11, the discourse on Islam as a terrorist religion and Muslim as terrorist people was hardly visible in the Western literature. For instance, Alex Schmid and Adrian Guelke whose works on terrorism were published

years before 9/11 do not link any faith whatsoever, what to speak of Islam, with terrorism.

At least four indicators suggest a growing convergence between mainstream perspectives on terrorism and peripheral viewpoints on the subject.

First, overtime, even in the Western literature on terrorism, terrorists are now treated as rational actors motivated by short-term goals such as spreading terror, and seeking public attention or state over-reaction. In fact, authors such as Louis Richardson consider counter-terrorism depicting over-reaction of the state parties as posing a far bigger problem to the international struggle against terrorism than terrorism by non-state actors.

Second, despite the absence of a consensual definition of terrorism, there is general agreement among Western and non-Western writers on the subject about its main features, including terrorism as an act of violence, its deliberate and organized nature, and the fact that more important in terrorism is not the violent act per se but what happens afterwards. Insofar as the identification of perpetrator in the definition of terrorism is concerned, there is general understanding that states, whether Western or non-Western, would for obvious respective reasons avoid the mention of state terrorism in any international bid, within or beyond the framework of the United Nations, to define terrorism. Thomas Mockaitis has articulated this point in his recent study.

Third, there is also greater understanding of the peculiar challenge that terrorism as a politically motivated act of violence poses to state sovereignty and international law, as they have evolved gradually since the establishment of the modern state system in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Terrorists are neither criminals, as the crimes they commit are motivated primarily by political goals, nor are they soldiers because they do not wear uniform and engage in open combat. Soon after the events of 9/11, Mary Robinson, the former UN Human Rights Commissioner, had argued that terrorists should be dealt with under the provisions of International Law regarding crimes against humanity. Her proposal fell on deaf ears then, and, instead, the alleged al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists nabbed mostly by Pakistani authorities ended up in Guantanamo Bay. That infamous prison may have been disbanded by the US Administration of President Barack Obama, but the issue of how to prosecute the cases of alleged terrorists is still there. The difference is that at least alternate ways of rendering justice to the perpetrators of terrorism are being discussed in the mainstream literature. So is the case with perhaps the most controversial counter-terrorism policy of pre-emption. Any state policy aimed at nipping the evil before the bud, or striking the enemy merely on the basis of its perceived ill intentions, poses perhaps the greatest challenge to the well-established principles of state sovereignty and international law. The mere acknowledgement of this challenge, despite the absence of any specific recommendation to tackle it, in the recent literature on terrorism augurs well.

A fourth sign of growing convergence between mainstream and peripheral perspectives on terrorism is that in the most recently published Western literature on terrorism, Islam is not depicted as much as a terrorist

religion, Muslims are not as much portrayed as terrorist people, and terrorists are not treated as much as mentally-retarded individuals as was the case during few years in the aftermath of 9/11. However, references are still made of terrorists being ‘evil doers,’ generalizations such as associating every act of terrorism with al-Qaeda are still popular, and lofty goals revolving around the preservation of a democratic and liberal way of life still characterize the rhetorical articulation of counter-terrorism agenda. The Western scholarly acknowledgement of terrorism as an activity motivated principally by political goals and the importance of continuingly unresolved conflicts as a primary source of organized non-state terrorism do not still do not meet peripheral non-Western scholarly expectations. However, just as we have seen growing convergence between the two perspectives on issues that were hugely controversial until recently, we can expect greater harmony between the mainstream and peripheral viewpoints on the subject in the foreseeable future.

### **Theorizing War on Terror**

The academic discourses of terrorism seem to be converging faster than the shift in the international conduct in the War on Terror away from exercising the realistically-grounded use of force option against terrorists towards employing non-military means against them as part of a pragmatic outlook conforming to neo-liberal agenda. But it is undeniably there. Even hardcore neo-realists like John Mearsheimer, for instance, believe that the solution to the Afghan conflict is negotiating peace with the Taliban.

Even otherwise, during the course of the War on Terror, we can clearly notice a mix of international neo-realist and neo-liberal policies

being implemented in Afghanistan. The UN lighter footprint approach to build the Afghan state, especially its political, legal and security institutions, and the European Union's preference for reconstructing the country, providing humanitarian relief and ensuring the respect for human rights as well as the various international donors conferences on Afghanistan—all showed international inclination for ensuring a more democratic and prosperous future for the war-torn nation through implementing essentially a neo-liberal or liberal institutional agenda. On the other hand, the Bush Administration's preference was to project American power through reckless employment of the military instrument. The reason NATO's European members such as Germany and France refused to share Washington's military burden in Afghanistan then was that by its very nature, the European Union as a regional bloc could not be expected to sacrifice its founding neo-liberal principles for the sake of a unilateralist, militaristic, neo-conservative agenda of the Bush Administration to establish a Western style democracy in Afghanistan—an eventuality that the EU would otherwise like to see but not through the employment of violent means. The trans-Atlantic differences over Iraq war could be explained likewise.

On the contrary, the Obama administration seems to be clear about its overall political objective in Afghanistan and the importance of means other than the use of force in resolving the Afghan conflict. Under Obama, the language of war has started to change. Therefore, policies constructed on this language may also change overtime, if not soon but surely later. I think the reason President Obama is sending 17,000 more US troops to Afghanistan for combat operations and has secured 5,000 more European

troops for non-combat missions in the country at the April NATO summit is because his administration believes the reason Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan has increased in recent years is because of the diversion of the international counter-terrorism effort from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2003. Otherwise, intensifying the war effort is dichotomous to the neo-liberal legacy of the US Democratic Party.

From the recently announced review of the US policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is clear that President Obama has set a realistic and pragmatic goal for Afghanistan, which is now limited “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan.” He has assured Afghanistan and Pakistan a long-term US commitment. Central to that effort will be the vast amount of aid and development projects in the two countries. Moreover, the Obama policy review recognizes that there is no military-only solution, saying the United States would be ready to reconcile with Taliban and other insurgents who surrendered arms and were willing to disassociate from al-Qaeda and their hardcore leaders. The short-term employment of military instrument appears to be a means to realize a broader politically-grounded resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan, as the pressure generated through an intensified military campaign make created an expanded moderate constituency among Taliban and their allies so that future peace in Afghanistan is negotiated largely on the terms and conditions of the state parties to the conflict. Whether such eventuality will actually occur or not is a different story.