

# Constructivist concepts of terrorism



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### **How Does Terrorism lend itself to Constructivist Understanding?**

Over the past twenty years, the essential nature of global politics has been changing profoundly and becoming even more complex. As the international system evolves it often renders traditional, materially-determined theoretical approaches to International Relations as ill-equipped to compellingly account for action. “ Increasingly, ideational concerns play a vital role as mobilizing influences, causing actors to behave in an unprecedented manner”.

Terrorism is a key phenomenon most typical of this complex trend towards the rise of the power of ideas. The terrorism we have seen in the past twenty years is ideologically-motivated and seemingly irrational meaning mainstream traditional theoretical understandings of anticipated action and reaction are no longer useful. In this essay, I will be analysing Constructivism as a theoretical lens for studying terrorism. First, I will establish the main themes of constructivism and then discuss how terrorism is constructed within the media and by states. I will use this to explain why I believe terrorism fits into the constructivist framework more so than other traditional IR theories. Then, with a particular focus on the terrorist organisation Al Qaeda and their activities I will show that terrorism only exists within our subjective understandings proved by its various definitions in contrasting communities. Ultimately then I will conclude that terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding because it relies on our subjective reality.

Constructivists believe the world is constituted socially through inter-subjective interaction. For a constructivist, agents and structures are mutually constituted and factors such as norms and identity are central to the establishment and dynamics of world politics. The central constructivist

argument is that “ states act on the basis of how they see themselves and others, and what types of behaviour they see as natural or desirable”[1]. Alexander Wendt a core social constructivism scholar insists that International Relations is ‘ not a given, but constructed’[2]. Wendt placed importance in ‘ the impact of ideas and identities, how they are created, how they evolve and shape the way states respond to a situation’[3]. Wendt’s central thought ‘ anarchy is what states make of it’[4] is often used to identify constructivism. He believes that the anarchy that exists in global politics is socially constructed by states based on their conceptions of identity and how they create their own security dilemma. He argues that this construction of anarchy is based on how states perceive ‘ the self and the other’ through shared cultural understandings which ‘ arise out of interactions’. Although he speaks mostly about state interactions constructivist thought can also be used in the interactions between non-state and state actors too. Terrorism lends itself to Wendt’s understanding of the three cultures of anarchy which depend on how identities are defined because terrorism is ‘ what states make of it’.

In 2012 Alexander Spencer carried out a metaphorical analysis[5] on terrorism which explains how terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding, through a study of the construction of the terrorist identity. The article develops an approach which emphasizes the crucial role of metaphors in the construction of reality. To illustrate this the article traces the metaphorical construction of Al-Qaeda in the German press after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington in 2001, Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. At first terrorism was represented as a war and this guided states into ‘

responding militarily'[6]. However, from 2004 onwards the primary metaphor shifted from war to crime and as a result Al-Qaeda was constructed as a criminal organization rather than a military organization. The influence of this construction of terrorism as a crime is seen in the counter terrorism policies of the UK post-9/11 which focused on immigration regulations[7].

This shift, the article argues has transformed Al-Qaeda from an external threat to an internal threat, which entails a shift in counter-terrorism practices from a military to a judicial response. 'The view that terrorism is crime leads [states] to favor legal solutions'[8]. The article argues from a constructivist point of view, that terrorism is a social construct. Although usually there is a particular focus on the terrorist actor when it is presented to us in the media but, the terrorist actor is a product of discourse therefore discourse is a logical starting point for terrorism analysis. In particular we must look at the discourse of the terrorists' enemies as it is this which effects the terrorist motivations, strategies, organisational structures and goals. Therefore, constructivist studying discourse rather than the individual is likely to give a more accurate view of actor's motivations. An investigation into metaphorical constructions of terrorism by Hulsse and Spencer in 2008 suggests that the change in the way the media constructed terrorism might be due to us 'getting used to Al Qaeda terrorism'[9]. Terrorism therefore lends itself to constructivist understanding as images of terrorism exist in different levels of construction and the way in which the media presents terrorism has a massive impact on how states respond to it.

Terrorism perhaps best lends itself to constructivist understanding due to the failure of other IR theories to understand the constructivist orientation of Al

Qaeda and this has led them to come up with a state-centric analysis of terrorism. A constructivist approach, thanks to its multidisciplinary understanding, can give more plausible insights about the role of norms, ideas, time and context in shaping the relation between states and terrorism as a non-state actor. Realism has very little to contribute to the discussion of Al Qaeda as a transnational actor post 9/11. This is because at realism's core is the belief that international affairs is a struggle for power among self-interested states. Foreign policy writer Jack Snyder argues because of this approach "it is difficult for the state-centric theory to explain why the world's only superpower announced a war against Al Qaeda, a non-state terrorist organization" [10]. International relations writer Burak KÜRKÇÜ [11] that the assumptions of liberalism on democratic institutions with liberal values and neoliberal understanding of peaceful change with the help of institutions also fails to adequately acknowledge terrorist groups or explain terrorist activity. An undivided opinion on the identification of "state" on one hand, fractured understanding of defining terrorism on the other hand makes it quite difficult to establish a stable ground with traditional theories.

On the other hand, constructivists do not have a picture of the world to be challenged by 9/11 because they believe the universe exists within the ideas of the people involved in it. 'Though constructivism offers no picture of what the world is like, it pushes enquiry into the processes by which humans construct understandings' [12]. From a constructivist point of view 9/11 took place because of a constructed identity which is antipathy for 'the west' and also an organization's desire to construct a new identity, one of a pan-Islamic movement. Lynch uses the basic tenets of constructivism which we discussed

as ' ideas, identities and norms'[13]to show how Al-Qaeda's strategy post-9/11 lends itself to constructivist understanding. According to Lynch " Al-Qaeda's strategy seeks to promote an Islamic ' identity', define the ' interests' of all Muslims as necessarily in confrontation with the West, and shape the ' normative environment in which Muslim politics are contested"[14]. Sayfal-Adel, an al-Qaeda strategist argued in a March 2005 interview that the " attack of 9/11 had succeeded in its primary goal of enticing the United States into direct interventions in the Arab region"[15]. This clearly shows why constructivists consider a transnational group with ideological influence to be an eligible actor on the political stage. Terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda lend themselves to constructivist understanding because unlike the other IR theories constructivists see structures and actors as mutually constituted. This is because it is not always that the structure determines states interests and actions but sometimes agents can influence the nature and the effects of a structure.

David Schild uses the case study of Al Qaeda in his dissertation piece to argue that we can use constructivism to understand the activities of Al Qaeda and this highlights the " value and appropriateness"[16]of constructivist enquiry. Through this analysis of Al-Qaeda, David Schild gains insight into how contemporary terrorism functions. A key part of his constructivist analysis is the examination of the agent-structure relationship as " it is concerned with the patterned manner in which norms (ideational structures) and the identities, interests and resultant actions of agents interact"[17]. In the case of Al Qaeda then, when you examine how ideational concerns influence action and vice versa then tentative generalizations can

be made regarding the functioning of the terrorist organization and in turn of terrorism in general. Similar to how constructivists have no picture of the world, Al-Qaeda has no territorial picture of its own, therefore it allows state actors to construct it for themselves. Lynch argued this point saying “Al-Qaeda’s constructivism derives both from structural factors- absence of a territorial base, a globalized field of contention shaped by the new media and information technologies- and Islamist ideas themselves”[18]. Therefore the functioning of Al Qaeda fits into Wendt’s thought process discussed at the beginning of this essay that “social threats are constructed, not natural”[19]. Terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding because it shows reality is socially constructed through interaction. Relationships under constructivism are products of historical processes and interaction. Author K. M Fierke[20] argues that the identities of actors such as these terrorist organizations have been shaped over time by cultural, political, material and social circumstances.

Terrorism lends itself to constructivism because the term ‘terrorist’ itself is so ambiguous and dependent on the person using the term. “Terrorism is not a ‘given’ in the real world; it is instead an interpretation of events and their presumed causes”[21] the definition of terrorism is therefore based on how it is being interpreted and constructed by individuals or states. We are reminded of this from the well-known phrase “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. Consequently, terrorism only exists within our subjective understandings and the definition varies “depending upon the context, available cultural resources and combinations of people involved”[22]. For social constructivist, the construction of terrorism as a ‘

social threat' can be seen in the intensity of a counter terrorism policy.

Terrorism lends itself to constructivism because it is a social fact " which requires human institutions for its existence"[23].

Terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding because it is a socio-political concept whose definition varies in contrasting communities. At the same time, it has adapted to the changes in its surroundings which has facilitated the capabilities of terrorists to utilize resources, solicit funding, and develop new strategies. Since terrorism is defined differently across various institutions, agencies and countries many conclude that there is not a single acceptable definition for terrorism that exists, after all one country's interests are different to that of another. As a result, an event can be considered a terrorist incident by some but a very similar act may be considered as justifiable by the same people, it often depends on who the perpetrator is and where the event happens. In the end, the labelling of a terrorist incident or group depends entirely on the often-skewed outlook of the individual or organization defining the event. An example of this is in the Palestine and Israel conflict, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was seen as a terrorist organization despite the fact it was considered by many Palestinian civilians as a body which represented them and they considered Israel as a terrorist state. However, the perception of the PLO as a terrorist group changed after the Madrid conference in 1991 when they agreed to recognize the right of Israel's existence. The conceptualization of the terrorist is not dependent on the threat that is personified by the individual, but as we can see in this instance the label of the terrorist is constructed through the



language and interpretation of events which engage the public's attention and support.[24]

When attempting to make sense of the social world, constructivists view certain aspects of reality as a construct rather than it being created. Constructivists view knowledge as views and beliefs which people have reasonable confidence in. Enlightenment thinker William Thomas produced the Thomas theorem whereby “ if a person perceives a situation as real, it is real in its consequences”. Meaning, behaviour is dependent on a subjective interpretation of reality. Terrorism lends itself to this thinking because it is not a given in society but instead an analysis of events and their presumed motives that can have serious impacts on how identities are constructed, and how these identities shape events and responses to these events.

Overall, I believe terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding because, as I have explored in this essay, it does not exist outside of our subjective reality but instead relies on human engagement for legitimacy and existence. Although a social fact, this does not mean it is any less real and often it is recognized and agreed upon by political organizations and institutions. After analysing how constructivists view the world and in turn, the war on terror it clarifies how terrorism fits into the constructivist framework. By moving away from a state-centric outlook, constructivists claim the west react to terrorism based on how they socially construct the concept of a terrorist. Following the attack of 9/11 we can understand why terrorism lends itself more so to constructivism than it does to any traditional IR theories as there was a need for non-material insight into the seemingly irrational actions of this new transnational group. By giving us an

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understanding of how agents can influence another agents action and how these actions interact and evolve, constructivism offers an insight into phenomena considered anomalous by mainstream theory. Constructivist perspective allows us to unpack the views of a terrorist group in order to begin understanding how its members shared sense of propriety engenders observed behaviour over time and explains why such behaviour runs contrary to that which is anticipated by the traditional theories. By considering the changing nature of self-interest with its non-material determinants, the role of identity in defining actors and the problems in cooperation and coordination faced by traditional theories, “constructivism seems a better-developed theoretical lens in terms of explaining global terrorism and its impact on changing state behaviour” [25]. Terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding because it is a social problem that cannot exist independent of the ideas of the people involved in it.

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