

Can 'terrorism' be justifiably distinguished from other forms of political violence...

[Society](#), [Terrorism](#)



Introduction

The conceptualisation of 'terrorism' began to occupy a prominent place in the political discourse during the 1970s, with the onset of irredentist terror employed by organisations such as the PLO and ideologically-induced acts of violence propagated by extremist outfits such as the Red Brigades and the Baader-Meinhof complex (Gupta, 2008: 33). Nevertheless, the preponderance of terrorism as form of violence has to be linked to its disruptive and pervasive nature. Unlike ideological or theological extremism, the modern conception of terrorism, epitomised by the dissemination of acts of violence by Islamic extremism in the context of the War on Terror, have the potential to shake the foundations of the international political system (Halper and Clarke, 2005: 90). As such, it is important to outline in which way terrorism differs from other forms of political violence. In order to do so, the example of the War on Terror will be used, distinguishing three variables that set modern terrorism apart from other forms of political violence. First, I will examine the discursive implications of the concept of terrorism, introducing a thorough examination of the political rhetoric used by the great powers fighting Islamic terrorism and in which way this serves to entrench American hegemony in the international order. Second, I will analyse the ways in which terrorism is changing the moral representation of the enemy confronted by the United States and its allies. Previous forms of political violence, such as left-wing militancy and the radicalisation of particular ethnic groups did not result in the determination to eradicate those tendencies from the political landscape. Conversely, the War on Terror does not allow for any sort of accommodation with the enemy, which is to be extirpated from the political

space. Third, the fight against terrorism presupposes a new demarcation of the international political system. The criteria for accepting the legitimacy of sovereign states into the legal framework of the international order is that they do not facilitate the operations of terrorist organisations, particularly those of Islamic extraction.

The discursive implications of the concept of terrorism

Since the outset of the War on Terror in the wake of 9/11, the political vocabulary attached to the concept of 'terrorism' has undergone a significant transformation. It could be argued that the notion of 'terrorism' reflects all the negative derivatives that stem from the struggle that parries the Western nations and their allies against the threat posed by radical organisations (Steinhoff, 2007: 81). In addition, terrorism has connotations that transcend the scope of legitimate political violence. To begin with, terrorists target non-military objectives as part of their grand scheme of operations. Terrorist organisations blatantly violate *jus in bello* principles that are part of the Just War theory by including of non-combatants as targets as well as employing censurable methods such as mass bomb explosions in public areas and the hijacking of civilian airplanes (Silverstone, 2007: 76).

The War on Terror, which originated in the aftermath of 9/11, has propitiated the militarisation of the political rhetoric, which relies on the notion of pre-emptive attacks on the putative enemy and its Manichean representation as a foe to be pursued until it is extirpated from the political space (Burke, 2004: 22). Entrenching the link between the War on Terror and military

rhetoric entails the construction of a system with particular symbolisms and political discourse (Napoleoni, 2004: 66). The political elite create socially-constructed meanings attached to the concept of terrorism that are assimilated by the public through the consumption of publically enunciated language. Academia, mainstream media and governmental organisations seem to prefer a passive way of describing particular political events pertaining to the War on Terror. For example, the War on Iraq, one of the main offshoots of the War on Terror, is seldom described as an 'invasion'. Instead, it is usually depicted as a military action meant to protect the United States from terrorists and to bring democracy and freedom to the people of Iraq (Steinhoff, 2007: 82). It may be posited that sophisticated discursive tools are employed in order to foment an '(in)securityculture' in the international order. Yongtao argues that the '(in)security culture' that arises as a result of the 'Axis of Evil' rhetoric, which pertains to the pursuit of the War on Terror, is lexically and socially constructed, and should not be perceived as a natural occurrence (Yongtao, 2010: 85). Consequently, the War on Terror might be seen as an attempt by the hegemon, the United States, to reclaim the geopolitical discourse from the centrifugal forces of globalisation and reshape the identity of the international order according to the rhetoric of insecurity and militarisation (Shapiro, 1999: 112).

One of the most salient features of the process by which modern terrorism is fundamentally differentiated from forms of political violence, is in the idea that there is no place for the radical forms of violent extremism in the international order (Halper and Clarke, 2005: 32). The rhetoric utilised by the

United and its Allies foretells an augmented spectrum of violence, which should prompt the reaction of the international community. This has been stated in the 'Axis of Evil' speech delivered by George W. Bush in 2002, 'States like these [Iraq], and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic' (Bush, 2002).

What transpires from the construction of the discursive edifice built around the notion of the doctrine of preventive war is the idea of strengthening the legal and institutional framework that legitimised American hegemony. This framework is validated by the interposition of an imminent threat, continually activated through the deployment of discourse. In this context, there is an obvious emphasis on identifying the rhetorical loci that give magnify and entrench the need to pre-empt the actions of the putative enemies (Podhoretz, 2004: 17). The augmented political reality of entrenching American hegemony is discursively affirmed through the encoding of language into categories that can be projected in order to activate the doctrine of preventive war. The 'Axis of Evil' speech is an eloquent example of this state of affairs (Nance, 2010: 60). In addition, the spectre of political regimes which are inimical to the process of legal, political and economic harmonisation has been magnified through the '

Beyond the Axis of Evil' rhetoric, mobilised by John Bolton, erstwhile US Ambassador to the United Nations,

'[T]he Administration will not assume that because a country's formal subscription to UN counterterrorism conventions or its membership in multilateral regimes necessarily constitutes an accurate reading of its intentions. We call on Libya, Cuba, and Syria to live up to the agreements they have signed. We will watch closely their actions, not simply listen to their words. Working with our allies, we will expose those countries that do not live up to their commitments...the United States will continue to exercise strong leadership in multilateral forums and will take whatever steps are necessary to protect and defend our interests and eliminate the terrorist threat' (Bolton, 2002).

As we can see, the discourse framework employed by the most prominent figures in the Bush administration has been conducive to the entrenchment of a unilateralist approach to the management of the international order, consolidating the idea of an interventionist stance that is profoundly revamping the notion of warfare (Nance, 2010: 82). What transpires from the statements outlined above is the idea that a language of dominance is permanently deployed as a means to portray those who opposed American hegemony as enemies to be pursued until their extirpation from the international arena (Fairclough, 2010: 43). Other forms of political violence do not threaten the stability of the United States as a primus inter pares member of the international community. The rhetoric utilised in order to deal with the derivative effects of the War on Terror is geared towards seizing this

historical juncture in order to consolidate the hegemony of the United States in the international order and clearly demarcate the boundaries between ' Good', represented by the United States and its allies, and ' Evil', embodied in the threat of terrorism.

The moral representation of the enemy

One of the most significant innovations brought about by the threat of ' terrorism' is the recreation of the moral representation of the enemy (Hewitt, 2008: 62). Since the Peace of Westphalia, the international political system gradually evolved towards the principle of cohabitation between antithetical philosophical worldviews (Patterson, 2007: 139). The epitome of this evolution was the convivial symbiosis between the two superpowers during the Cold War. Conversely, US foreign policy in the wake of 9/11 operates under the principle that state and non-state actors are to be considered ' friendly' only if they are willing to converge into the main tenets espoused by the United States in the context of the War on Terror. In order to consolidate a clear division between ' Good' and ' Evil', the enemy (Islamic terrorism) is represented as illegitimate and a-moral. Consequently, Washington has the moral right to use all the means at its disposal to prevent the enemy from inflicting damage upon the United States or its allies (Crawford in Rosenthal and Barry (eds.), 2009: 41). This entails the use of pre-emptive force, which has been deployed by the United States in the cases of Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and Lybia (2011). This entails the possibility that the war against Islamic terrorism may be fought outside the rules of warfare. The United States regards Islamic terrorists as devoid of any established links to a

specific territorial state. In this sense, Washington is not bound to adhere to any prescriptive set of rules. The enemy therefore becomes a modern day version of the *hostis perennis* deprived of any legal rights either in *bello* or *ad bellum*. Since the Islamic terrorist networks seek the destruction of the United States, they must vanish from the political space. The moral identification of the enemy as 'evil' was presented to the American public by the neoconservative ideologues in charge of outlining the foreign policy of the United States in the wake of 9/11,

"WHO, THEN, is the enemy? The message of September 11 was loud and clear, allowing for no ambiguity: the enemy is militant Islam... At least since 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini seized power in Iran with the war-cry, "Death to America," militant Islam, also known as Islamism, has been the self-declared enemy of the United States. It has now become enemy number one. Whether it is the terrorist organizations and individuals Washington is targeting, the immigrants it is questioning, or the states it is holding under suspicion, all are Islamist or connected with Islamists" (Pipes, 2002).

In order to confront this enemy, the strategies predicated on ideas of deterrence and containment, once used in order to face the threat posed by the Soviet Union, are to be considered efficacious,

"Throughout the Cold War, the legitimacy of U. S. power and of U. S. global leadership was largely taken for granted, and not just by Americans. The vast majority of Europeans, although they sometimes chafed under U. S. dominance and often questioned U. S. actions in Vietnam, Latin America and

elsewhere, nevertheless accepted U. S. leadership as both necessary and desirable... It was not international law and institutions but the circumstances of the Cold War, and Washington's special role in it, that conferred legitimacy on the United States, at least within the West" (Kagan, 2004: 70).

The legitimacy for seeking the annihilation of the enemy is therefore granted by the geopolitical circumstances that the United States is compelled to deal with. The enemy is represented as a-moral, lacking any sense of propriety in warfare,

"...[T]omorrow could be the day that an explosive packed with radioactive material detonates in Los Angeles or that nerve gas is unleashed inside a tunnel under the Hudson River or that a terrible new disease breaks out in the United Kingdom. If the people responsible for the 9/11 attack could have killed thirty thousand Americans or three hundred thousand or three million, they would have done so. The terrorists are cruel, but they are not aimless. Their actions have a purpose. They are trying to rally the Muslim world to jihad against the planet's only superpower and the principal and most visible obstacle to their ambitions. They commit terror to persuade their potential followers that their cause is not hopeless, that jihad can destroy American power" (Frum, D. and Perle, 2004: 6)

American foreign policy doctrine holds Islamic extremists to be an enemy force outside the scope of international law; as such, it is to be pursued until its total eradication (Elshtain, 2004: 142). One of the main points made

concerning the moral representation of the enemy is the portrayal of the threat that Islamic terrorism poses to the United States as imminent, prompting American foreign-policy makers to overstate the lethality of the foe (Fotion, 2007: 96). In any case, the moral representation of Al-Qaeda reverses an important principle of the 'Just War' theory. Islamic terrorism cannot be allowed to become an interlocutor for segments of the Muslim world. It is an enemy with whom no cohabitation is possible. It is an 'othered' moral and social entity which has to be completely eradicated from the geopolitical space. the scope of enmity has been enlarged according to a Manichean criterion, leaving outside the political space constituencies with a different cultural and moral template (Schmitt, 2007: 13). At the same time, the means to be utilised in order to deal with putative threats are augmented by the unrestricted use of pre-emption, regardless of the actual extent of the threat posed by the would-be foe. This has enormous repercussions for the notion of state sovereignty, since the doctrine of preventive war can be launched against any nation which is considered to abet terrorist activities that pose a danger to the United States, first and foremost, and the international community (Nance, 2010: 110). As we will see, terrorism differs from other forms of political violence in the sense that it fosters the intervention of the United States and the most prominent members of the international community into the internal affairs of sovereign nations.

The interventionist drive pursuant to the fight against terrorism

The first theme that is relevant to the discussion of the interventionist drive that unfolded with the onset of the War on Terror is the erosion of the strict concept of state sovereignty. Since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) the concept of sovereignty has been entrenched as the dominant principle upon which global institutional organisations are constituted (Held and McGrew, 2002: 11). Thomson defines sovereignty as the conceptualisation by which the state arrogates the right to exercise coercive authority within its territory. It could be argued that the nations involved in the struggle against terrorism are willing to sacrifice a modicum of state sovereignty in order to ensure the protection of the global commons (Thomson, 1995: 219). However, the indefinite duration of the conflict is bound to profoundly change the meaning of state sovereignty, particularly as the means to combat terrorism come to include a growing spectrum of surveillance and military robotisation.

The practice of eroding strict notions of national sovereignty involves the use of force and/or the exercise of political power in order to defend the 'civilised' nations of the world from the scourge of terrorism. This also entails that the process of globalisation has to be recreated according to an increasingly unified legal criterion, which serves to entrench the democratic form of government, the rule of law and free markets. The War on Terror is a concept which is commonly subscribed to the efforts made by the international community to eradicate the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism, especially Al-Qaeda and other militant jihadi groups (Duffy, 2005: 21). The term was first employed by President George W. Bush on

20/9/2001 and has been used to designate the legal, political and conceptual confrontation against terrorist organisations of Islamic extraction (Bush, 2001a). The ubiquitous nature of this struggle is quite manifest in the statements made by George W. Bush, who stated the view that the fight against Islamic terrorism engulfed the whole world as a potential theatre of conflict (Bush, 2001b). The War on Terror has redefined the boundaries of legality, entailing a division between those countries which support the struggle against Al-Qaeda and those which are either neutral or explicitly supportive of Islamic terrorism, such as Iran. Those countries which are deemed to support terrorism risk losing their capacity of retain state sovereignty.

It could be argued that the actions of the United States and its allies can be analysed through the Realist principle of power maximisation. At the most fundamental level, anarchy is induced by the fact that there is no supranational authority capable of marshalling the international order (Biersteker and Weber, 1996: 5). Conversely, Liberal interventionists sustain the view that a peaceful international order can be attained by encouraging the spread of democracy around the world. One of the main principles behind this philosophy is that democratic states do not fight each other (Doyle, 1997: 83). The spread of democratic values entails that the countries that were most affected by the Western response to 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq, would undergo a process of regime change and adopt the principle of accountable governance (Rasler and Thompson, 2005: 38). As we can see, the War on Terror impels states to adhere to the principles guiding the fight

against Islamic terrorism in order to retain their sovereignty in an increasingly polarised international order.

One of the most salient issues linked to the discussion on the interventionism reshaping the international order after 9/11 is the issue of 'efficiency' as a requirement for the retention of state sovereignty. What transpires from the unfolding of the War on Terror is that 'failed states' constitute a significant danger to the stability of the international political system (Kagan, 2003: 22). Countries like Somalia or Afghanistan under the Taliban are eloquent examples of countries governed by a plutocratic elite unconcerned about the well-being of the population. Fukuyama has posited the criterion by which the 'efficiency' of the state structure of any given nation should be measured. In order to be eligible for state sovereignty retention, countries need to exhibit a high level of adherence to democratic and pluralist values (Fukuyama, 2005: 125). It could be postulated that the right to state sovereignty is beginning to be judged according to whether a country abides by the principle of liberal democracy. States deemed to be undemocratic are more likely to sponsor terrorism.

The main objective of the War on Terror is the elimination of the threat of global terrorism. At the same time, the interventionist approach which guides the foreign policy of the United States and its main allies seeks to recreate the international order according to converging rules to be adhered to by all members of the international community (Neumann, 1986: 25). The link between sovereignty and the rule of law is consolidating through the warfare conducted against terrorist networks, since states are compelled to

take their position on the side of the 'civilised nations' of the world. It has been argued that terrorism poses a threat to the "humanness" of the victims it targets. The protection of civilian lives as well as the maintenance of the system of government by consent have become the two most important variables to be factored in when analysing the Liberal interventionist implications of the War on Terror (May, 2007: 71).

It can be postulated that the War on Terror is reshaping the international order by compelling the acceptance of the social role of international norms by the members of the international community. The convergence process taking place in the system of states as a result of having to fight terrorism is entrenching the rule of law as the medium for dialogue and communication in interstate affairs (Scheuerman, 1997: 39). When states display fundamental divergences from this principle, they are perceived as hostile to an international order increasingly informed by Liberal values such as democracy, free markets and the rule of law. Furthermore, by opposing these principles, these states might erode their right to be recognised as sovereign, giving rise to the possibility of intervention by the United States and its allies (Fukuyama, 2005: 130). Intervention takes place within the context of a thin form of multilateralism, by which the United States undertakes to expand Liberal values, provided they coincide with the majority of its core national interest principles. Simultaneously, it can be said that the convergence process signposted by the consolidation of homogenised legal principles of global reach is demarcating the lines between 'efficient' states, which may rightfully retain state sovereignty, and

' failed states' which may be subject to intervention (Chan, 2012: 61). The War on Terror has enabled the liberal democracies of the world to expand their values to the wider world in a manner which enables them to maintain their military and political pre-eminence and brings forth the pacification of the international political system. Therefore, it can be postulated that terrorism differs from other forms of political violence in the fact that whilst the risks it poses to the international community are magnified so are the possibilities for a profound change in its ordering principles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to argue that modern conceptualisations of terrorism differ to a significant extent from previous forms of political violence confronted by sovereign states. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political violence was exercised in order to achieve certain gains that were usually restricted in scope and duration (Scheuerman, 1997: 41). For example, the rise of left-wing activism was linked to defined political and economic objectives. Once the social conditions of the working class was improved, violence was shunned as a legitimate political method, as seen in the rise of social democratic parties willing to adopt a gradualist approach to income redistribution (Gupta, 2008: 53). Conversely, the onset of the War on Terror has brought with it a new demarcation of the political space, both at the domestic and international level. The spectrum of mass destruction as well as the ubiquitous presence of terrorist threats, due to technological advancement, has created a number of important differentiating variables. Terrorism, mainly propagated through

the ideology of Islamic extremism, has the potential to alter the configuration of the international order (Halper and Clarke, 2005: 75). This development entails that the fight against this form of political violence has to be carried out at different levels. To begin with, the rhetorical elements of the War on Terror are recreating the communication aspects of the fight against terrorist violence. The symbolisms attached to it are meant to portray the indefinite duration of the confrontation and the polysemic nature of the threat (Burke, 2004: 87). Furthermore, terrorism differs from previous forms of political radicalisation in the way that the enemy is represented. The forces in charge of combatting terrorism have conveyed the determination to achieve a complete eradication of the ideology that underpins it, rejecting any sort of accommodation with the enemy. The War on Terror proposes a new delineation of the international order, where the criterion for state legitimacy is that nations prevent terrorist organisations, particularly those of Islamic extraction, from operating in their territory (Duffy, 2005: 151). For all the reasons cited above, it is possible to posit that terrorism, especially in the context of the War on Terror, differs significantly from other forms of political violence. The circumstances which originated this phenomenon and the means employed to combat it presage a conflict of indefinite duration which is bound to profoundly change the nature of interstate relations.

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