DEBATING RELIGIOUS TERRORISM: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper will focus on analyzing the theoretical debate on terrorism. Taking into account the complex nature of this phenomenon, it will focus mostly on the debate developed about religious terrorism (with special interest on Islamic nature) during the last decade, due to its implications for national as well as international security. It will engage in a metatheoretical and critical approach, evaluating the state of the debate and its future perspective. It will be based on the assumption that the emergence of a series of theories and approaches towards international religious terrorism has not developed in accordance with the integration of empirical and statistical proper evaluations, thus lacking an important testing component of every analysis about the impact and framework of such a security issue. It is only by merging empirical and theoretical elements of religious terrorist cases into a single analytical framework that can be built a proper methodology with a broader application in the security as well as in geopolitical evaluations of scholars and policymakers. For this purpose, the paper will explore a wide range of theories. It will start with Mia Bloom's theory of suicide terrorism, dealing with authors' religious motivations in various locations, such as Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, etc. The comparative and critical analysis will continue with Robert Pape and its interpretation of the strategic logic of suicide attacks, adding an important strategic aspect, with its differentiation of the levels of strategic analysis. The comparative analysis will go on with Martha Crenshaw's explanation of terrorism structure and its social and political consequences. In line with the previous theories, the main argument of her theory is that religious terrorism (or, more generally, terrorist behavior) constitutes a rational strategic choice of its actors: there are other non-psychological elements, beyond the psychological dimension of the actors involved in terrorist violence. Therefore, empirical analysis of terrorist violence becomes increasingly important. In the theoretical debate about terrorism a valuable methodological contribution has come from Walter Laqueur, which offers a historical comparative approach, bringing terrorism into the agenda of international security, geopolitics and international relations. The paper will also reflect the approaches of Bruce Hoffman, focusing its analysis on Middle East and David Rapoport, whose approach based on the waves of terrorist violence is very valuable for our argument.

The 2 nd International Conference on Research and Education – "Challenges Toward the Future" (ICRAE2014), 30-31 May 2014,

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Theoretical debate on terrorism: priorities and limitations

This paper will analyze a series of theories on terrorism, trying to use empirical and analytical elements, intertwined in many cases with a comparative methodology, with the aim to provide a full and scientific landscape for the interpretation of this phenomenon from the security and geopolitical perspective. In this regard, one of the most explored and comprehensive theories of contemporary terrorism is the theory that focuses its attention on the issue of suicide attacks, the motives of the perpetrators of these acts, especially related to the conflict in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya or elsewhere, in other geographical areas. The most prominent scholar of this theory is Mia Bloom. At the very center of her theory are important research questions for the study of that part of terrorism related to suicide terrorist attacks: their dynamic capacity to diffuse in large geographical areas or regions, as well as the theoretical and political successes and failures of this analysis. Her most important theoretical interpretation (Bloom, 2005) begins with a review of terrorism history (focusing on the logic of suicide attacks) and continues with the scientific interpretation of this form of terror in order to achieve the political and strategic objectives of terrorists, that she classifies according to their priority, from the objective to produce fear in public, to receiving the attention of international and media actors, to guaranteeing the popular and financial support for the terrorist cause, or to the social and psychological analysis of the suicide bombers (Crenshaw, 2007: 133-67). Against what was widely thought when analyzing terrorism, Bloom argues that, from an empirical perspective, suicide attacks are mostly motivated by social and political reasons, instead of religious ones. Her theory is based on the empirical and qualitative interpretation of the numerous cases of suicide attacks, varying from the Kurdish suicide attacks in Turkey, to the Palestinians, Iraqi and the so called "Black Widows" in Chechnya. Bloom (2005: 230-4) comes to two very important conclusions in the field of terrorism studies: first, that terrorist organizations are more prone to use suicide attacks as a strategic instrument, when a large number of terrorist actors support the same cause – in which case each of them attempts to show the highest possible degree of zeal to the cause; second, that suicide attacks show a remarkable capacity to geographically "migrate" in all the regions with open conflicts, and can be used geopolitically and strategically from international terrorist organizations.

To this field of terrorism studies has been associated the theoretical interpretation of another important scholar, such as Robert Pape. In his seminal work "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism" (2003) he argued that there does exist a clear strategic logic behind the campaign of terror in various regions of the world and in different historical moments –such as in the Palestinian territories, in Sri Lanka, in Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, etc. These forms of attacks are only a tactic in order to obtain a strategic objective. Thus, according to Pape's theory, we have to clarify the levels of strategic analysis. In his theory about the suicide attacks and international terrorism after 2001, Pape (2003: 24-32) has noticed the empirical increase of such attack cases, arguing that religious fanaticism cannot explain it. This theoretical argument results very important because it opposes the widespread argument that suicide attacks happen exclusively as a result of religious extremism and misinterpretation of religious doctrines (Lutz & Lutz, 2006: 262-5). It follows from this that religious zealotry doesn't explain why, for example, Sri Lanka is the geographical region with the major number of suicide attacks in the world, where organizations such as the Tamil's Tigers, a group that pretends to belong to a Marxist-Leninist ideology, has been responsible for using this form of terror for its own geopolitical and strategic interests. The theory that he offers in order to improve our understanding of terrorism, is based on the empirical collection and qualitative analytical interpretation of 187 cases of terrorist attacks allover the world for the period 1980-2001. Unlike existing interpretations, this study shows

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that suicide terrorism has a strategic logic, shaped specifically to impose modern liberal democracies to make important territorial concessions. Furthermore, during a period of more than three decades, suicide terrorism has known a considerable increase, attributed to the fact that terrorists are now aware that it is an efficient tool. Thus, through suicide attacks, terrorists sought to impose on American and French troops to abandon Lebanon on 1983, to constrain on Israeli troops to abandon Lebanon on 1985, to compel Israeli troops to depart from the Gaza Strip and West Bank in 1994 and 1995, or to force the government of Sri Lanka to create an independent Tamil state from 1990, or to press the Turkey government to accord an increased autonomy for the Kurds, and so on. According to Pape, in all other cases except Turkey, the political cause of terrorists achieved considerable benefits after using suicide terrorist operations. Thus, the western democracies must undertake political decisions that convey the message that what happened during the 1980-s is not important any more and because this courses of action can have better results in improving national security than military offensive actions (Pape, 2006: 29).

Another consolidated theory in the study of terrorism is one that sees it as a fundamental strategic choice of non-state actors. According to Martha Crenshaw (1981: 379), the study of terrorism can be organized around three main pillars or questions: i) why is it happening; ii) how does it work; iii) and, what are its socio-political effects. Such a triad of scientific research questions is found at the very center of Crenshaw's theory, delivered and cultivated during the last three decades, accepting the fact that the articulation of a comprehensive theory on the phenomenon of terrorism is never easy and that in any case it is possible to build a theoretical structure for different types and levels of causes (Crenshaw, 1981: 280). The multi-level differentiation of types and causes of international terrorism has undoubtedly made easier the survey of its preconditions. In this sense, Crenshaw argues that the first condition to be taken into consideration as a direct cause of terrorism is the existence of discontents within a part of population, as for example within an ethnic minority discriminated by the majority. In this context, terrorism becomes the strategic instrument developed by an extremist fraction of this wider national movement, as demonstrated by the numerous cases of the Basques, Brettons, Irish, Palestinians, and so on (Marsden & Schmid, 158-201). This precondition for the existence of the terrorist phenomenon run into the research question: why in many other countries where minorities have had their discontents, such violent phenomena have not appeared (Crenshaw, 383).

The second condition that creates the motivations for terrorism is the luck of chances for political participation. Regimes that deny any access to power for a specific part of their population forge discontents of a political nature, much more than discontents of an economic and/or social nature. In these cases discrimination is not directed against any ethnic, religious and/or racial group of the population – hence, the terrorist organization is not necessarily part of a broader social movement (the most salient example being the anarchist terrorism in the Czarist Russia of the 1870s). Especially important in this regard is the context as a direct cause for terrorism, when its acts of violence are directed towards the elite and not towards the population in general, as was clearly the case with the leftist terrorist groups during Cold Wars years in Western Europe. These groups focused their terrorist activity against exponents of the political and economic elite, arguing that their attacks were based in the Marxist-Leninist ideological doctrine. In these cases, terrorism represents the strategy of a small number of individuals that (in a non-legitimate way) claim to represent a wider group. As once argued Eric J. Hobsbawn in his famous essay "*The Revolutionists*" when referring to political plotters of the post-Napoleontic Europe: "*all revolutionists saw themselves –justified to some extent– as small, emancipated and progressive elites, acting in the name of an extremely broad community of ordinary people, disoriented and ignorant, that would welcome liberation if and when it came, but which could not participate in the preparation to*

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bring it about" (Hobsbawn, 1973: 226-7). In this context it is useful to refer also to Kenneth Waltz, arguing in its seminal work "*Man, State and War*" that it is necessary to make the distinction between the context for action, as an accelerative cause of war and special reasons as immediate causes (Waltz, 1959: 232). In some cases this approach can be useful to argue that terrorism occurs when there are not any preconditions to prevent it.

A third category of factors that might ease, accelerate or produce terrorism includes the concept of a precipitating event that precedes the explosion of a terrorist wave of violence (Crenshaw, 1998: 384). Even if this argument was mentioned for the first time by Martha Crenshaw in 1981, the most prominent example was September 11 and the attacks against United States. Governments are frequently inclined to use violence in an effort to oppose to acts of organized violence in protests or rebellions, inducing therefore terrorist acts from various groups. This has happened frequently throughout history, a famous example of which being the use of terrorist violence by the terrorist organization Narodnaya Volya after the use of state violence by the tsarist regime in Russia during the late XIX century, or the execution by the British government of the so-called heroes of the "Easter Rebellion" which set the scene for the placement of Michael Collins as head of IRA and the beginning of a new wave of terrorist violence of the organization against England.

In her theory on international terrorism, Martha Crenshaw argues that terrorism and terrorist behavior is also product of a strategic rational choice. Beyond the psychological analysis of terrorism there are also non-psychological but realist and strategic calculations. Therefore, terrorism can be better understood as a new form of political strategy (Crenshaw, 1998: 7-25). Theorizing terrorism as a strategic and rational choice –delivered mainly by theorists of the realist and neorealist school of international relations– means that terrorist acts emanate from rational and well-calculated decisions. They represent the optimal strategy chosen by terrorist actors in pursue of specific socio-political objectives (Crenshaw, 1988: 245-61).

According to this school of thought, composed also by Sandle, Lapan and other scholars, terrorism might not represent a pathological or non-logical behavior, but it can be seen instead as the best instrument in order to fulfill the objectives in specific circumstances. At a certain degree, this theory might be seen as representing the reaction to the hypothesis that terrorism is but a psycho-pathology and should be treated more as an illness of the individuals practicing it that as a rational instrument (Post, 25-40). The rational approach theory towards terrorism was born and developed from the economic and applied mathematical sciences, especially from the game theory (Sandle & Arce, 2003). Game theories analyze situations where the choices of an individual (or a group) depend on those of other individuals (or groups): depicted as zero-sum gains situations or non-zero-sum ones (the typical example of game theory is the Prisoners Dilemma, the cornerstone of all rational strategic choice theories interpreting the fragile dilemma of the Cold War and the strategic relations between United States and Soviet Union (Arce & Sandler, 2003: 183-200). Using this analytical approach, Saddler and Arce have developed a series of algorithms and graphic techniques to better understand the consequences these situations have upon individuals. According to them, these techniques can be used not only to understand terrorist behavior, but also the behavior of their victims or objectives (Sandler & Arce, 2003). Game theory highlights the interdependence between terrorist and other structures, such as government, media, public opinion, as well as their insecurity regarding the actions and reactions of the enemy.

Game theories presuppose that players –that in this case are terrorists and governmental/state actors– take their strategic decisions rationally, optimizing the chances of success and fully aware about the limits of their decision-making model. From this perspective, even though terrorism is abominable, it represents the most practical and low-

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cost instrument for terrorist actors in their endeavor to influence powerful institutions. At this point we might use the classical definition of asymmetrical threats, that they are understood as "threats including terrorism, non-conventional guerilla tactics, as well as the probability to use weapons of mass destruction by actors other than states, aiming to maximize damage and strategic advantages" (Blank, 2003: 4). If game theory and its models that predict actors' behavior are applied to terrorism, researches might gain a scientific method capable to predict governmental and terrorist behavior. On any case we must admit that within the social science logic, these models have a lot of limitations.

As every theory that aims to interpret a multidimensional and difficult issue such as terrorism, the rational choice theory displays its interpretative limits. First of all, as Crenshaw argues, terrorist objectives might be unacceptable, thus their actions might not always go towards the rational end of the spectrum in order to fulfill their objectives (Crenshaw, 2000: 405-20). A second limitation rests in the psychological hurdle that constrains an individual – driven by the conviction that terrorism is the right instrument to promote a certain cause– when he/she has to be in the position of a direct killer of a victim. Third, some acts of terrorist violence are clearly based on irrational behavior, as testified by the examples of Unabomber in Italy, or the 2011 terrorist attack in Finland by a mentally ill individual. Forth, the theory of rational choice cannot properly accommodate the emotional and impulsive effects of the actors' behavior. Finally, as argued also by J. M. Post (2004: 20-25), "if terrorism was a phenomenon based merely on strategic and rational choices of its actors, than they would have dissolved after achieving victory and fulfilling their strategic objectives. But the empirical data often suggest that terrorist actors go on with their activity even after fulfilling their strategic objectives.

But a precious contribution in dealing theoretically with terrorism has been advanced by Walter Laqueur. He offers a comparative analysis of the historical development of terrorism, extremely valuable for the historical contextualization of this field of study. Laqueur builds his theory on clear holistic premises, seeing terrorism as a phenomenon present during all historical stages (2001: 30). It completes an entire cycle of research in international relations, especially in the field of security studies. Laqueur offers a useful approach because he includes for the first time scientifically and systematically the study of guerilla warfare in the activities of actors and terrorist groups, articulating for the first time the concept of the transformation of war as a process (Laqueur, 2001: 90-2). His theory posits the history of political terror in Europe during the 19th century, the terrorism of anarchic groups during the 1880s, the clashes between the extreme left and rights during the first decades of the 20th century, up to the empowerment of the religious terrorism at the end of the previous century. According to him, the changes in intensity of this phenomenon during the previous decades have made it more difficult to study within any specific theoretical context. On any case, Laqueur offers a sociological and psychological interpretation of terrorism, contributing in fabricating an authentic doctrine of systematic terrorism, of its motives, models and strategic effectiveness.

A different approach on terrorism is offered by Bruce Hoffman, in his seminal study "*Inside Terrorism*". He offers a fundamentally new way of approaching terrorism, building a new study discipline that combines historical analysis with the historical development of terrorism during the last two centuries, with the difficulties encountered by researchers when trying to define the phenomenon of terrorism, as well as with the analysis of terrorism in the Middle East region, fully integrating the investigation of using religion by extremist ideologies (Hoffman, 12-130).

On the other hand, David Rapoport has offered another informative perspective of scientific interpretation of terrorism (borrowing the term by the Samuel Huntington's theory of 1991 about the "*Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*"). He uses the idea

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of waves of terror, considering them according to their historical appearance. According to Rapoport, the first wave of terrorist violence can be systematically observed during the 1880s, referring to the terrorist violence perpetrated by the anarchist organizations (Rapoport, 2002). The anarchist wave went on for about four decades, until the end of World War One, leaving the stage to the "*Anti-Colonialist*" type of terrorist violence, pursued from the 1920s till the end of the 1960s in the former colonial countries against the western colonizers. Rapoport put the "Third Wave" of terrorist violence during the period 1960-1990. This period coincides with the political violence practiced mainly by the extreme left in a number of Western European countries, inspired especially by the communist ideology. Finally, he explores in depth the "Forth Wave", labeling it "The Religious Wave", starting with the Islamic Revolution in Iran and its intensification during various historical periods after 1979, especially after the terrorist attacks against United States on September 11, 2001.

On the other hand, two prominent scholars, such as Alex Schmid and De Graaf offer another important theoretical interpretation of terrorism. They use different theoretical lens, integrating communication within the theory of terrorism. The essence of Schmid and De Graaf theories rests in the idea that the study of terrorist violence and communication is indivisible, and that previous theoretical effort to see both these fields of study separately and isolated from each other have failed to grasp the plenitude of this issue and, as such, they don't fulfill some basic conditions of being a social science theory as, for example, the capacity to fully and objective explain a social reality (Schmid & De Graaf, 1982: 23). They also argue in favor of a new communication form, based more on "soft power" components.

Another theory has been developed by Walter Enders and Todd Sandle, who approach terrorism through the explanatory lens of political economy. Offering such a new approach to the study of terrorism, Enders and Sandler intertwine the economic analysis with the analysis of a new political reality in regional and global level (Enders & Sandler, 2006). They have applied this methodology in the political analysis of domestic and transnational terrorism, producing a qualitative and quantitative interpretation of this security phenomenon. This makes their theory more balanced than that of most scholars of international security. Also it becomes even more useful to policymakers, researchers and public opinion in general. Enders and Sandler have combined in a unique theory the political and economic interpretation of terrorism as a security phenomenon with sound geopolitical grounds, with historical aspects of terrorism, with the debates about terrorist capacities after the Cold War (especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001), with the strengthening of modern terrorist organizations as well as with the dilemmas of western democracies, the impact of anti-terrorist measures or the economic impact of extending the global battle against this phenomenon.

Another approach of studying and interpreting terrorism is offered by Ronald Crelinsten, that analysis the correlation of torture with the human rights and western democratic way of political life, as one of the more problematic aspects of the way specific states have operated in their endeavor to strive against international terrorism. According to Crelinsten, one of the most important threats for the anti-terrorism strategies developed by western countries after September 11, especially for the anti-terrorism strategy of United States, is the damage inflicted to the democratic principles, shrinking them a lot for the sake of domestic or international security, as well as regarding the effectiveness of accumulated information. According to Crelinsten this affects negatively not only the democratic principles, but also the legitimacy of the struggle against terrorism in front of the world public opinion (Crelinsten, 1993; 2009).

Except from the scholars that have developed various theories on how to better understand and explore international terrorism and its geopolitical implications, there exist another group of scholars whose research, even though borrowed by other disciplines such as

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history and regional studies, has become very important –in some cases even decisive – for any scientific explanation of this security phenomenon. From this perspective, a fundamental importance has the decades-long historical approach of Bernard Lewis, one of the most prominent historians and scholars of the Middle East of our times. Lewis has fully analyzed the importance of understanding the historical processes of the Middle East for a better interpretation of Islamic radicalism and the relationship between Islam and the West. Also, according to this prominent scholar, this is the proper way to enrich and deepen the knowledge of academic community and policymaking circles about the reasons that cause terrorist violence from international terrorist organizations based especially in countries of the wider Middle Eastern region (Lewis, 2009). In other important works, Lewis has argued that during the last decades, one of the most important premises of radicalism in the Arab world is the way that Islamic civilization has lost not only its leading role in the world on almost all areas of knowledge during the XII-XVI centuries of our era, but has actually and systematically produced undemocratic and not-free regimes, mainly totalitarian, that closely connected state with religion and that randomly used state apparatus for repression and terror upon its own people (Lewis, 2002). Such a socio-political environment produced throughout history a series of tyrannical regimes with an increasingly destabilizing geopolitical effect (Lewis, 1993 & 2002). In this sense, the religious radicalism has found a fertile ground to multiply the number of its supporters, building its radicalizing discourse within a spiral of hate and wrath against the West and everything related to it. It is precisely this context that, in its most extreme form has produced [and legitimated] terrorism, raising any suicide acts as a cult and divine desire. Thus, according to Lewis, the Muslim civilization, once flourishing as one of the most progressive civilizations of the world, has reached a stagnation phase prompting Muslims in first play to search within their own civilization for the true reasons of the fallbacks, posing the question: "*What went wrong?*", not reaching their look towards the West and the Christian world for all the problems of the Muslim world, especially for those of the Arab world (Lewis, 2002 & 2007). On any case, we have to mention also other causes, outside the Middle East system, as the various historical decisions of the European colonial powers that have impacted negatively in the development and consolidation of a community of democratic states throughout the entire region, as well as in the structuring of the economic processes throughout the twentieth century. In this sense, this argument aims to dismantle that part of Islamic extremism discourse that legitimate terrorist violence and '*Holy War*' as the only instruments against the West. The other argument about the democratization of the Islamic world conflicts with different social organization perception of the Muslim societies. The social and religious tolerance, the respect of human rights (as they are pictured by the Western democracies), the freedom of expression, the free political competition and the equality between men and women, don't match the principles of Islamic extremists about the society they are willing to create.

In this context, the theoretical setting offered by Lewis appears highly valid. It is enhanced by the fact that he is one of the first scholars engaged with the study of religious extremism immediately after the Cold War, especially with his extremely famous article "*The Roots of Muslim Rage*" (1990), preceding the theory of Samuel Huntington about the "*Clash of Civilizations*", appeared some years later, during the summer of '93. In his article Lewis investigated the roots of what he called "the Muslim Rage", bringing about the argument that the clash between Christian and Muslim worlds has been present since the times when Arab kingdoms were blooming until nowadays. The hate molding Muslims against the West emanates from a combination of clearly historical causes with the multiple failures of the Arab countries and societies throughout the twentieth century.

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