

How Does the ‘Terror’ of Terrorism Function? The Nature, Process, Object and Impact of Terror

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Abstract

Given the semantics and the etymological roots of terrorism, the importance given to terror and fear is hardly surprising. However, in spite of all this attention, basic questions about the nature, process, object and impact of this fear/terror remain largely unanswered. How terror or terrorism functions and plays out in the real world is open to debate and contestation. Most academicians have their own perspectives and often conflicting perceptions of terror. There is also significant confusion over how the attribute of terror and fear relates to terrorism generally. The non-existence of formal theory and conceptualization in the field of terrorism studies has further complicated and aggravated the problem. This paper is an attempt to fill this theoretical gap. It sets out to discern carefully and methodically the functioning of terror and its subsequent bearing on the phenomenon of terrorism. The findings will hopefully contribute towards ongoing efforts of theorization and conceptualization in the field of terrorism studies.

Key Words: Terror, Fear, Terrorism, Etymology, Nature, Process, Object, Process, Function, Theory, Conceptualization

Introduction

Notwithstanding the dispute over the definition of terrorism, almost everyone would agree that the role of terror is crucial to understanding terrorism. This is because ‘terror’ is arguably the most standout and pronounced characteristic of terrorism. Whether or not there is consensus

over the meaning of terrorism, most scholars will generally concede that terror is an indispensable feature of terrorism. This distinction is hardly surprising, given not only the etymological roots of the term but also the fact that terror is part of the very word terrorism.

In spite of this distinction, the terror of terrorism is poorly understood. There is significant confusion over not just the centrality of terror but also over how it functions. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap. It methodically sets out to understand the functionality of the terror of terrorism. By doing so, it is hoped that it will be an important contribution toward a greater understanding of terrorism itself.

While there have been some significant contributions in this regard,¹ most of the academicians typically engage with the issue only superficially or take it at face value. Such superficial engagement with the problem has only added to the ambiguity and vagueness of terror. Also as a result of this, some very basic yet fundamental questions about terror and its relationship with terrorism remain largely unanswered. By analyzing how the terror of terrorism functions, this article aims at addressing some of these theoretical and conceptual shortcomings.

The functioning of terror can be better understood in terms of its nature, process, object and impact, which further include thirteen different but interrelated factors (violence, political, credibility, repetition, coercion, communication, direct/indirect targeting, deliberate, symbolic, recipient of violence, random/indiscriminate, psychological dimension and overreaction). Following is the nature of terror.

¹ See e.g. Jeremy Waldron. 2004. "Terrorism and the Uses of Terror," *The Journal of Ethics*, 8 no. 1 (2004).

It is pertinent to point out at the outset that the word ‘terror’ originates from the Latin word “terrere” which simply means to frighten. The word terror therefore could alternatively be interpreted in terms of fear. For this reason, the paper tends to use the terms ‘fear’ and ‘terror’ interchangeably.

The Nature of Terror- Violence (*political, credibility, repetition*)

For terror to take effect, social life must be affected in some way. Violence or the threat of violence is one of the ways in which this can be achieved. And since terrorism is widely regarded as a form of violence, it is important to see how this violence functions and generates terror.

Many scholars consider the violent factor fundamental to the core understanding of terror and terrorism. Crenshaw believes that for terrorism to occur ‘the violent act is essential’.² Wellman also notes that ‘there must be some terrifying act or at least some act that intends to be terrifying’.³ Schinkel observes that a ‘certain form of violence’ among other things makes up the core of terrorism.⁴ Claridge notes that ‘terrorism is a systematic threat or use of violence’.⁵ In a similar vein, Walter points out that ‘conventionally, the word ‘terrorism’ means a type of violent action, such as murder, designed to make people afraid’ and powerfully asserts that ‘Violence may occur without terror, but not terror without violence.’⁶

² Martha Crenshaw. 2011. 7 “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Terrorism Studies: A Reader* (2011): 23.

³ Carl Wellman. “On Terrorism Itself,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (1979): 253.

⁴ Willem Schinkel. 2009 “On the Concept of Terrorism,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 8 no. 2 (2009): 185.

⁵ David Claridge. "State Terrorism? Applying a Definitional Model," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 8, no. 3 (1996): 50.

⁶ Eugene Victor Walter, *Terror and Resistance: A Study of Political Violence, with Case Studies of Some Primitive African Communities* Vol. 1. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 5, 14.

Although there is a general agreement that terrorism broadly involves violence or the threat of it, there is, however, considerable debate over whether the violent act is essential or should its threat suffice. Burleigh Wilkins argues that terrorism is the ‘actual or threatened use of violence’ and believes that the threat of violence is sufficient for an act to be terrorism.⁷ Angelo Corlett also agrees with Wilkin’s logic and points out that terrorism ‘need not be violent, but pose only a threat of violence’, which he believes ‘best captures what is essential to terrorism’.⁸ Crenshaw, on the other hand, argues that the threat itself does not constitute violence and therefore the act at least as a demonstration of an actor’s ability is essential.⁹

For our discussion specifically, the important thing to note here is what affects the individual and causes terror- Is it the violent act itself or the threat of it? Fear will only be generated if people genuinely feel threatened and if their social life is affected, be it through violence or the threat of it. What is important, therefore, is the credibility of violence or its threat. To trigger fear, people must be made to believe that the threat of violence is real. Without such a guarantee, the social life of individuals cannot be influenced. It is because of this that scholars such as Crenshaw believe that a demonstration of an ability to carry out violence is necessary. As Carl Wellman points out, ‘Unfortunately, it must be felt that the threat is not mere bluff. Therefore, no systematic or repeated course of terrorism can avoid the actual infliction of grave harm’.¹⁰

⁷ B. T. Wilkins, *Terrorism and Collective Responsibility* (Routledge, 1992), 4.

⁸ Angelo Corlett. "Can Terrorism Be Morally Justified?" *Public Affairs Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1996): 167-168.

⁹ Crenshaw, "The Causes of..." 23.

¹⁰ Wellman, 1979 "On Terrorism..." 253.

This demonstration of capability for credibility argument is made for two main reasons. Firstly, to see whether the actor possesses the ability and the resources to carry out the threat. And secondly to find out if the actor has the willpower to carry out the threat. This argument, although true for non-state actors, does not necessarily hold for states.

It is normal to challenge the credibility of non-state actors as their capability and intention are not given. The non-state actors have to first acquire the necessary material resources to carry out violence. And because of the legal apparatus in place, which will prosecute them if they proceed with their threats, they must also demonstrate a willingness to engage in violence and a readiness to face the consequences thereof. Hence, even if the non-state actors have the capability they still must demonstrate their willingness to engage in violence. A demonstration of capability and intent is therefore essential for taking the non-state actor's threat seriously. On the other hand, a state's capability is evident and for that reason, it needs not to demonstrate it. Secondly, since there is no effective legal process in place to prosecute states, there is little if at all any reason to doubt its intention. In other words, a threat of violence by the state is usually sufficient.

This can be explained more clearly with an example. The organization Al Qaeda is a non-state actor and before (or without) the use of violence, few would have taken it seriously. To gain credibility, it, therefore, had to demonstrate its capability and intent through the physical use of violence. On the other hand, if the United States (hypothetically speaking), made similar threats, then it would be outright foolish to doubt its credibility.

If we want to keep our understanding of terror and terrorism actor-neutral, a demonstration of capability should not be treated as a prerequisite for

terrorism. As I have shown, a reference to this attribute is generally made to emphasize the significance of credibility. And if it is credibility that we seek then instead of squabbling over whether terrorism requires a violent act or just its threat, we can alternatively say that terrorism only requires a credible threat of violence. Although most cases of terrorism generally involve a demonstration of some sort yet it should not be seen as an absolute imperative or made a matter of definition as the nature of terror only requires the credibility of a violent threat.

Thus, it is neither necessarily the violence nor the threat specifically but the sound credibility of either violence or its threat that affects the individual social life and causes some form of fear. Furthermore, deducing from the above discussion, the threat of violence directly corresponds to a possible threat of future harm, both mental and material. Hence, the credible threat of future violence can also be understood as a credible threat of future harm.

It must also be pointed out here that the specification of the violent method (such as bombing, assassination, murder, suicide etc) is irrelevant because terrorist violence is for an effect, which can be achieved through potentially any violent method, tying terrorism down to a certain mode of violence is therefore meaningless and counterproductive.

Entangled with the factor of a credible threat of violence is the element of repetition. Numerous scholars have emphasized the importance of repetitive violence to terrorism. Alex Schmid's well-known definition of terrorism, for instance, points out that 'Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action'.¹¹ The factor of repetition enjoys considerable

¹¹Although Schmid subsequently removed 'repetition' from his revised definition of terrorism in 'The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research', 2011 (p. 86).

popularity in academic circles. Its popularity owes much to the idea that generation of fear is dependent on sustained violence or repetition of violence. However, for reasons discussed already, repetition of violence need not be treated as a defining characteristic of terrorism.

A mere threat of repetition should suffice, provided of course the threat is credible. For as long as the threat of future violence is credible, a threat of repetition will be implied and consequently, terror will be generated. There is also no need to alter the categorization 'credible threat of violence' discerned above as it adequately incorporates the factor of repetition as well.

Lastly, this violence is essentially political. There is but little disagreement whether terrorism can have motives other than political but as Bruce Hoffman notes, 'terrorism, in the most widely accepted contemporary usage of the term, is fundamentally and inherently political'.¹² Leonard Weinberg and William Eubank also consider the political objective as 'a widely shared element' of most terrorism definitions.¹³ Richard English forcefully asserts that it is 'important to recognize the centrality of politics and power to any proper definition'.¹⁴

However, some scholars believe that terrorism should not be restricted to just politics. Shaun Kaplan, for instance, formulates his definition in a way to accommodate both politically and non-politically motivated acts of violence.¹⁵ Timothy Shanahan likewise argues that terrorism should not be

¹² Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2006), 2.

¹³ Leonard Weinberg and William Eubank. "Problems with the Critical Studies Approach to the Study of Terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1, no. 2 (2008): 188.

¹⁴ Richard English. "The Future of Terrorism Studies," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 2, no. 2 (2009): 24.

¹⁵ Shaun Kaplan. 2009. "Three Prejudices Against Terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 2, no. 2 (2009): 188.

restricted to just the political element and includes ideological, social, religious and military reasons in his definition of terrorism.¹⁶

However, the important point to note here is that all such inclusive approaches do not necessarily challenge the political factor but merely point out that terrorist motivations could be more diverse than just political. Secondly, all other stated reasons, such as ideological, social, religious, etc. (as long as violence turns into terror) will not be devoid of political content. The nature of terror then is simply a *politically motivated credible threat of future harm*.

The Process of Terror- Coercion (*communication, direct/indirect targets, deliberate*)

The element of coercion, in combination with communication, direct/indirect targets and the deliberate factor, delineate the process of terror. The Oxford English Dictionary defines coerce as ‘Persuade (an unwilling person) to do something by using force or threats.’¹⁷ Coercion thus refers to the act of persuading someone to do one’s bidding through the use of force and threats. This definition does capture the essence of the academic argument as well since terrorist coercion is widely held to be the use of violence or its threat to intimidate an unwilling target audience into conceding to the demands of the perpetrators. Coercion is one of the most highlighted features of terrorism and many scholars regard it as a defining

¹⁶Timothy Shanahan. "Betraying a Certain Corruption of Mind: How (and how not) to Define ‘Terrorism’," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2010): 177.

¹⁷ Available at: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/coerce>. Accessed on April 2, 2022.

characteristic of terrorism. Luis Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, for instance believe that coercive violence is part of the core of terrorism.¹⁸

In *Terrorism and the Uses of Terror*, Jeremy Waldron provides a detailed account of the coercive apparatus of terrorism. He believes that the coercion in terrorism is different from our classical or ordinary understanding of coercion. Waldron points out ‘In the classic case of coercion, the coercer threatens to perform an action which would impose costs on the victim... but in the case of terrorism... we are talking about a mode of coercion that already imposes at least some of the costs that the coercer is supposed to be threatening’.¹⁹ Waldron further explains that the terrorist, unlike an ordinary criminal does not give an ultimatum that ‘comply with my demand or I will impose harm H’ instead the terrorist imposes the harm H1 and then says ‘comply with my demand or I will continue to impose harms (H2, H3,...) of the kind I have already imposed’.²⁰

Wellman also provides a very comprehensive model of coercion. He believes that a terrorist must first and foremost produce an act that is terrifying in some manner and then ‘if the terrorist is to use or attempt to use the terror caused as a means of coercion, the terror must be of a very special kind... The object of useful terror, then, is always some future harm or evil, not the harm or evil of the past action that created terror. It may well be that

¹⁸ Luis De la Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Terrorism," *Politics & Society* 39, no. 3 (2011): 453.

¹⁹ Jeremy Waldron. 2004. "Terrorism and the Uses of Terror," *The Journal of Ethics*, 8 no. 1 (2004): 9.

²⁰ It should be pointed out here that although Waldron goes on to challenge the assertions that terrorism generates terror and that all terroristic violence is essentially coercive (2004: 25-32), his conceptualization of the coercive element of terrorism is nonetheless still very helpful for our discussion. Ibid.

this prospective reference is built into the logic of the concept of terror'.²¹ Wellman further asserts that 'every threat of terrorism must be a threat that some great harm will be inflicted if the coercion is resisted'²².

Both these models of terrorist coercion share three key points- an actual terrifying violent act, a threat of future attacks and a demand for compliance. Of course for both Waldron and Wellman, a violent act (and not just the threat of it) is essential to make the threat credible. However, as explained earlier, this is not an absolute imperative, especially if we want to keep our conceptualization actor neutral. A credible threat of future violence should be enough.

At first glance, it appears then that there is not much difference between the description of coercion and credible threat of violence. However, on closer inspection, it becomes obvious that where both require credible future threats, coercion by its nature (to force someone to do something against his will) also demands a reaction- compliance.

This compliance comes in different shapes and sizes and depends largely on the specific demands of the actor, which vary significantly from actor to actor. It will therefore be gravely misleading to specify them. However, since we know that all terroristic violence is inherently political, therefore, we can at least reasonably argue that the coercive violence of terrorism requires political compliance of some sort. This compliance could be recognition or acknowledgment of some political grievance. The coercion

²¹Wellman, "On Terrorism...", 253.

²² Ibid.

of terrorism, therefore, is in effect a mode of intimidation- forcing its target audience to do its bidding through a generation of fear.

Now since the coercive apparatus requires compliance, it must also be communicative because if the terror process demands a certain response, its threat of violence must communicate that message. Bruce Hoffman and Gordon McCormick regard the communicative feature of terrorism as a ‘signaling game in which terrorist attacks are used to communicate a group’s character and objectives to a set of target audiences.’²³ We can modify this description according to the logic that has been discerned in this paper. Hence, terrorism is a signaling game in which a credible threat of violence is used to communicate a message to a certain target audience/audiences.

The communication of terrorism functions through direct and indirect targeting. As Wilkinson points out that terrorism ‘is directed at a wider audience or target than the immediate victims of violence’.²⁴ Richard Jackson believes that this indirect targeting is central to the understanding of terrorism, ‘frightening one group of people to produce a political change in another is the essence of the terrorism tactic’.²⁵ Virginia Held notes that ‘Terrorism is political violence that usually spreads fear beyond those attacked’.²⁶ Wellman makes a very important distinction between what he calls a ‘victim of terrifying act’ and a ‘victim of coercion’.²⁷

²³Bruce Hoffman and Gordon H. McCormick. "Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27, no. 4 (2004): 243.

²⁴ Paul Wilkinson. "The European Response to Terrorism: Retrospect and Prospect," *Defence and Peace Economics* 3, no. 4 (1992): 289.

²⁵ Richard Jackson. "State Terror, Terrorism Research and Knowledge Politics," *British International Studies Association Paper* (2008): 384.

²⁶ Virginia Held. "Terrorism and War," *The Journal of Ethics* 8 no. 1 (2004): 68.

²⁷ Wellman, "On Terrorism..." 254.

The direct or secondary targets of terrorism are the actual victims of harm that terrorism inflicts, whereas the indirect victims of terrorism are the ones for whom the message has been generated and are therefore the primary targets of the terrorist threat. The direct victims of terrorism are secondary targets in the sense that they only serve as message generators for the real or primary target audience. And the primary target is an indirect victim because it does not face the inflicted harm/violence directly but is affected (at a psychological level) by it.

It is common to observe a further division that is made in relation to the primary target of terrorism (indirect victims). This classification observes a distinction between an audience that relates directly to the victim and another that relates somewhat indirectly. Rapin observes such a distinction between what he calls indirect target (general population) and active target (governmental authority).²⁸ However, such a distinction is not analytically helpful and could lead to confusion for two reasons.

Firstly, it does not account for the direct targeting of government employees or people close to or related to the government in some manner. Secondly, this distinction applies primarily to non-state or insurrectional terrorism and is therefore not actor neutral. A simple direct and indirect targeting communicative mechanism- where one is a victim of the act and the other a victim of coercion- is, therefore, more accurate and helpful. It is important to also point out here that the state of terror and fear will persist as long as

²⁸ Ami-Jacques Rapin. "Does Terrorism Create Terror?" *Critical studies on Terrorism* 2, no. 2 (2009): 171.

the primary target is aware that the terrorist demand of compliance has not been met, provided of course the terrorist actor does not retract its demands.

A final and perhaps the most contested element of the process of terror is the deliberate factor. The deliberate factor has a range of different senses, which are hardly ever fully realized. There are three different ways in which the deliberate factor can be understood- deliberate generation of fear, the deliberate selection of objectionable targets and deliberate in a sense of rational decision. I will argue that where it is possible to challenge the deliberate factor when it comes to generation of fear and target selection, its third sense- deliberate as in rational decision, cannot be challenged.

This argument draws on a much broader debate in the literature regarding rationality of actors that practise terrorism. There is a widespread agreement that terrorists are not irrational or suffer from any psychological pathology. As Romon Spaaij notes, 'It has been frequently argued that terrorists should not be regarded as suffering from any identifiable psychopathology'.²⁹ Max Taylor and John Horgan point out 'Efforts to understand terrorism in terms of abnormal, individual or other special motivations' seem inappropriate as 'there seems to be little or no evidence of particular or distinctive individual qualities being associated with the terrorist'.³⁰

Brian Jenkins almost four decades ago similarly observed that 'Terrorism is often described as mindless violence, senseless violence or irrational

²⁹RomonSpaaij. "The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33 no. 9 (2010): 862.

³⁰Taylor, Max Taylor and John Horgan. "A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist," *Terrorism and political violence* 18, no. 4 (2006): 585.

violence. None of these adjectives is correct'.³¹ Jenkins, therefore, cautioned against seeing terrorists as irrational or psychopaths. Hence, if the actors that practice terrorism are not irrational then their decision to employ terrorism must be deliberate. The rationality argument also entails that terrorism is purposive violence and not violence for violence's sake, which explains how it is also coercive in the sense of placing a demand of compliance on its target audience. The process of terror can thus be described as *the deliberate use of violence³² to demand political compliance or make a political statement of some sort through secondary targets chosen from a primary target.*

The Object of Terror- Recipient of Violence (*random/indiscriminate, symbolic*)

Having discussed the nature and process of terror, we can now move to the object of terror or simply the recipient of violence. The object of terrorism concerns the target or the victim of terrorist violence. We have already discussed the issue of direct and indirect terrorist targets but is it possible to specify these targets. There is considerable debate in the terrorism discourse regarding the identity of victims of terrorist violence. Most of this debate revolves around identification of the victims as innocent, civilians and non-combatants. Such categorization is mainly done to point out the non-violent nature of the terrorist victims.

The terrorist victims, both direct and indirect, are generally seen as not engaged in any clear belligerent activity with the perpetrators of the terrorist

³¹Brian Jenkins, *International Terrorism: A New Kind of Warfare*. No. P-5261. (RAND CORP SANTA MONICA CALIF, 1974), 3.

³² Deliberate as in choice to use terrorist violence and not necessarily deliberate in the sense of generating fear.

violence. Therefore, since they do not pose a clear visible threat of harm to their attackers nor are in a state of violent conflict with them, they are believed to be innocent or non-harming (although the attackers may not necessarily see it that way). As Philip Devine and Robert Rafalko explain ‘Innocence distinguishes ordinary people from soldiers and officials under most circumstances... Innocent means not harming’.³³ However, the term innocence raises some serious normative considerations and is therefore usually substituted with a civilian. The category of civilian is also sometimes deemed problematic because it does not include off-duty, retired or auxiliary military personnel.

The category generally preferred therefore is non-combatant (although generally both civilian and non-combatant categories are used). This substitution, however, does not eliminate the reason for using these categories. Civilians and non-combatants do not pose a clear and direct threat of harm to anyone and are therefore believed to be not harming. Such a view is reflected in Coady’s definition of terrorism, ‘The organized use of violence to attack non-combatants (‘innocents’ in a special sense) or their property for political reasons’.³⁴ Tamar Meisels also points out that ‘targeting the civilians is the essential trait of terrorism’.³⁵ Louise Richardson believes that targeting civilians is the ‘most important distinguishing characteristic of terrorism’.³⁶ The academic discourse is similarly abundant with references to civilian/non-combatant targeting. It is

³³ Philip Devine and Robert Rafalko. “On Terror,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 463 no. 8 (1982): 42.

³⁴CAJ Tony Coady, “Terrorism, Morality, and Supreme Emergency,” In *Terrorism*, ed. Igor Primoratz (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

³⁵ Tamar Meisels. “The Trouble with Terror,” *The: Liberty* (2008): 26.

³⁶ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2006), 22.

widely regarded as one of the most shared elements of the definitions of terrorism.³⁷

Tied down to the element of the recipient of violence is the notion of random and indiscriminate violence. The indiscriminate/random attribute implies how the terrorists go about selecting their targets. As the recipients of violence are not harming and do not pose any visible threat to the terrorists, therefore their selection appears random and indiscriminate.

The random and indiscriminate nature of terrorist violence is also regarded as one of the reasons why terrorism generates fear, as potentially anyone could be its victim. Numerous commentators on the subject include the indiscriminate/random attribute in their respective definitions of terrorism. Wilkinson, for instance, identifies 'indiscrimination' as one of the key characteristics of political terrorism.³⁸ Michael Walzer argues that 'Randomness is the crucial feature of terrorist activity.'³⁹ Following Walzer, Meisels believes that terrorism entails the 'intentional random murder of defenceless non-combatants'.⁴⁰

The indiscriminate and random targeting of civilians, especially with the rise of critical scholarship has been subject to intense criticism. The reasons for this criticism are manifold and mostly grounded in the moral debate. The first and perhaps most frequently cited criticism posits that treating terrorism as indiscriminate and random would also entail that it operates without any constraints and is therefore no different from categorically condemnable

³⁷Weinberg and Eubank, "Problems with the Critical...", 187-188.

³⁸ Paul Wilkinson, *Political Terrorism* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 11.

³⁹ Michael Walzer. "Terrorism and Just War," *Philosophia* 34 no. 1 (2006): 197.

⁴⁰Meisels, "The Trouble with...", 29.

heinous crimes like genocide and wartime massacres.⁴¹ The second line of criticism suggests that the use of terms like indiscriminate and random may imply senselessness and irrationality and terrorism as we know is a rational and purposive activity.⁴² Lastly, it is argued that certainly, not all acts of terrorism are indiscriminate, as English notes, ‘random selection of victims has often been absent from what are terrorist attacks.’⁴³

Despite criticism, recipients of terrorist violence generally do not pose a direct or open threat to terrorists, even though terrorists themselves may not necessarily see it that way. Therefore, when someone amongst them is targeted, the attack has the appearance of being random and indiscriminate at least to the indirect victims of the attack. This means that they are random not in the real but perhaps more so in a consequential sense.

There is no denying the fact that there is a sense of randomness to terrorist violence, which I shall argue is perhaps best captured by more contested symbolic attributes. This symbolic attribute of terrorism also enjoys substantial academic patronage.⁴⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines a symbol as ‘A mark or character used as a conventional representation of an object’.⁴⁵ In line with the dictionary definition, treating terrorist targets as symbolic would mean that they are representative or mark of an object, a specific and not random or accidental target. Treating a terrorist act as symbolic therefore does not denounce the actor or the act as irrational or senseless.

⁴¹ Kaplan, “Three Prejudices Against...,” 184.

⁴² Coady, “Terrorism, Morality and...,” 7.

⁴³ English, “The Future of...,” 9.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Wilkinson (2000); Schmid and Jongman 2005.

⁴⁵ Available at: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/symbol>. Accessed on 6/6/2018.

A symbolic characterization of the object of terror as opposed to indiscriminate not only invites far less criticism but also better accounts for the seemingly random appearance of terroristic violence. *The object of terror then is the direct victim chosen for its symbolic value to a primary target.*

Impact of Terror- (*Psychological and Overreaction*)

The nature, process and object of terror concurrently result in producing the last but also the most outstanding facet of terror- the impact of terror (psychological and overreaction). Terrorism is perhaps the least eventful form of violence in terms of casualties. Its importance owes largely to the impact it subsequently has. As Jessica Wolfendale points out, ‘Although the threat of terrorism to individual lives is less than many other threats, terrorism does not only threaten lives; it threatens psychological wellbeing’.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the psychological impact is more central to terrorism than perhaps any other form of violence, as Ariel Merari notes, ‘all forms of warfare have a significant psychological ingredient’ but for terrorism ‘its psychological impact is the most essential element’.⁴⁷

Since fear generation is essentially a psychological process, it is important for furthering our understanding of the matter to fully appreciate the interplay between terror and psychology. The work of Karen Jones in this vein is particularly noteworthy. In *Trust and Terror*, Jones points out that

⁴⁶Jessica Wolfendale. “Terrorism, Security, and the Threat of Counterterrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 no.7 (2006): 758.

⁴⁷Ariel Merari. "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, no. 4 (1993): 232-233.

‘the power of terror lies in’ what she calls ‘basal security’.⁴⁸ ‘Basal security’, she explains, ‘is a folk psychological notion, posited to explain the dissonance between risk as judged and risk as experienced, both emotionally and practically’.⁴⁹

In other words, it is to an extent through an instinctive and not an entirely rational sense of safety and security that people judge and assess threats and risks. Hence, even though terrorism produces far fewer deaths than other forms of violence or natural disasters, its seeming randomness and indiscriminate violence put an individual’s basal security at risk, which radically affects the individual’s response and behaviour.⁵⁰ A loss of basal security thus leads to a heightened sense of risk and vulnerability,⁵¹ which subsequently leads to an overreaction.

Following this line of argument, Wolfendale also notes that even though terrorist attacks pose far less threat to human lives than various other threats but because of their apparent randomness such ‘attacks make human fragility and vulnerability highly salient’ and ‘Because of this, we desire reassurance and a sense of security that we do not require for less visible threats that pose a greater objective threat to our lives and well-being’.⁵²

Terrorism thus is a form of violence that directly impacts human psychology through evoking our innermost insecurities and vulnerabilities, which consequently results in exaggerating the threat it otherwise poses. Although this exaggeration and psychological impact of terrorism is an overreaction

⁴⁸Karen Jones, “Trust and Terror,” In *Moral Psychology: Feminist Ethics and Social Theory*, ed. Peggy DesAutels and Margaret Urban Walker (2004), 3.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p.9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵² Wolfendale, “Terrorism, Security, and...,” 758.

in itself (which can be termed as an emotional overreaction), the overreaction in popular understanding generally refers to the physical response to terrorist violence. It is argued that the disproportionate psychological resonance of terrorism compels individuals to overestimate the threat, which may lead to disastrous overreaction. The real cost of terrorism, therefore, comes not from terrorism itself but from overreaction to it.

This psychological and especially physical overreaction to terrorism has, over the years, been a subject of intense scrutiny. John Mueller is amongst some of the strongest critics of overreaction. He points out that 'The cost of terrorism very often comes mostly from the fear and consequent reaction (or overreaction) it characteristically inspires, not from its direct effects which are usually comparatively limited'.⁵³ Hanan Alan made similar observations back in 1980. He argued that 'life is life', whether lost to terrorism or some other cause' and therefore 'recommended that society's 'subjective probabilities' concerning terrorism be adjusted to objective probabilities and that resources be allocated in proportion to the latter'.⁵⁴

Dallas Boyd and James Scouras take this argument even further and suggest that the terrorists deliberately provoke this overreaction, which they believe to be self-destructive. They call this characteristic the 'dark matter of terrorism'.⁵⁵ They believe that the consequences of a reaction to a terrorist attack can outweigh the damage of the attack itself as the adverse

⁵³John Mueller. "Six Rather Unusual Propositions about Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17, no. 4 (2005): 487.

⁵⁴Martha Crenshaw. "A Welcome Antidote," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17, no. 4 (2005): 517.

⁵⁵Dallas Boyd and James Scouras. "The Dark Matter of Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 12 (2010): 1124.

consequences of terrorist attacks are mostly produced by the response rather than the terrorist provocation or the act itself. This observation prompts them to use the term ‘catalytic terrorism’.⁵⁶

Given the importance of the psychological impact, an overreaction to terrorism is certainly not surprising. However, should its importance prompt us to make it part of the conceptual framework or a matter of definition? Schinkel strongly believes that we should. He argues that an overreaction to terrorism is part of the core and a ‘crucial characteristic to the conceptualization of terrorism’.⁵⁷ For Schinkel, any conceptualization or theorization of terrorism is incomplete without the ‘dialectic of (over) reaction’.⁵⁸

An overreaction to terrorism is certainly very central and perhaps to an extent even unique to it. However, tempting, as it may be to make it a matter of definition, such an undertaking will probably not be very helpful. Apart from the normative challenges that are bound to arise, it will make any definition and understanding of terrorism largely restricted to only non-state terrorism.

A physical overreaction to terrorism refers to a policy or military response by a state and therefore would apply only to non-state terrorism. Thus any conceptualization of terrorism in terms of a physical overreaction (which is how overreaction to terrorism is generally understood) will only apply to non-state terrorism and not terrorism in general. Furthermore, in the case of state terrorism, because of the resources available at its disposal and the

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 1129.

⁵⁷ Schinkel. “On the Concept of Terrorism,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 8 no. 2 (2009): 187.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 191.

historical evidence, which suggests that it is far more destructive than non-state terrorism,⁵⁹ an emotional reaction need not necessarily be an overreaction, as the fear generated may well be proportional to the intensity of the threat. Thus, where a disproportionate psychological response to non-state terrorism is plausible, any such psychological response to state terrorism would usually be considered anything but disproportionate.

Secondly, as far as a physical reaction to state terrorism is concerned, there are some serious constraints because individuals unlike the states lack the physical resources essential for such a course of action. Thus, in the case of state terrorism, an emotional overreaction may well be justified and a physical overreaction is generally not a possibility as the resources needed for it are generally non-existent. In other words, where physical overreaction may help in conceptualizing non-state terrorism, it falls short of accounting for state terrorism. Therefore, if we want to keep our understanding of terrorism actors neutral, overreaction should not be made a matter of definition. Hence there are obvious problems with incorporating overreaction into a broader conceptual framework of terrorism, the psychological effect by itself on the other hand faces no such qualms. The *impact of terror* then is simply *the psychological effect it has on its primary targets*.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Jackson (2008); Burke (2008); English (2009).

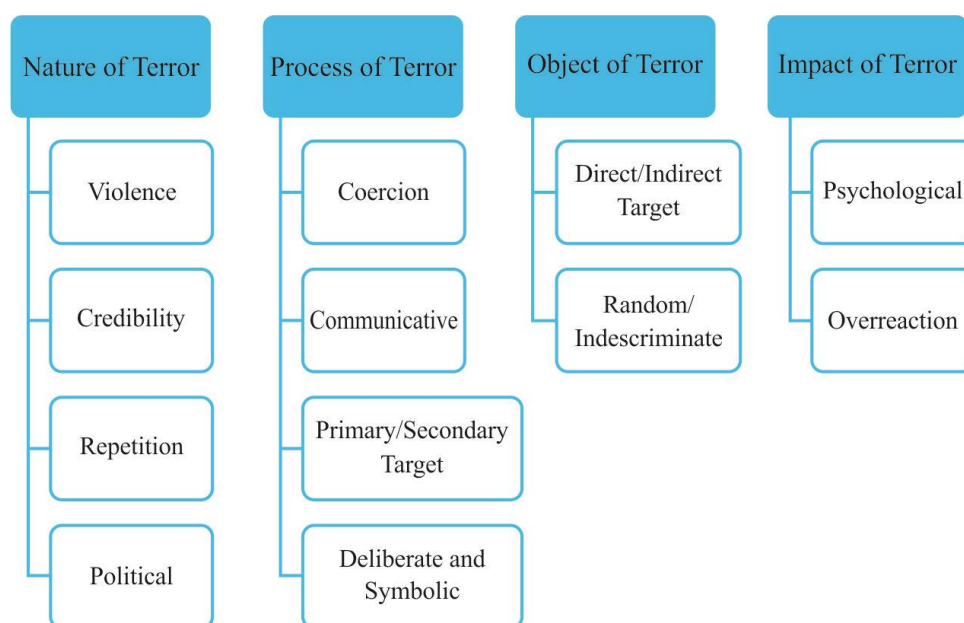


Figure 1: How does the terror of terrorism function?

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to understand the functioning of terror through discerning its nature, process, object and impact. The way terror functions that is: *through a credible threat of future harm, demanding some form of political compliance, communicated utilizing a secondary target that has symbolic resonance with a primary target, consequently affecting it at a psychological level and generating some form of fear.*

This description does not suggest that the fear generated is deliberate and only points out that fear is generated because the process, nature and object of terror subsequently affect the individual psychology. It is important to note here that this is not intended as a prospective definition of terrorism but merely to show how terrorism functions in society. However, with that being said, it may still be utilized for definitional development purposes.

Fear or terror is central to understanding terrorism and discerning its operational and functional sense, as this paper does, is a step in the right

direction. For a conceptually and theoretically weak discipline like terrorism studies, many such contributions are urgently needed.

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