



Comprehending Terror

Author(s): Eqbal Ahmad

Source: *MERIP Middle East Report*, No. 140, Terrorism and Intervention (May - Jun., 1986), pp. 2-5

Published by: [Middle East Research and Information Project](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012023>

Accessed: 01/03/2011 11:29

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Death squad victims, El Salvador. Marcello Montecino

Comprehending Terror

Eqbal Ahmad

Let us begin with the dictionary definition of terror—"intense, overpowering fear"—and of terrorism—"the use of terrorizing methods of governing or resisting a government." This simple definition has the virtue of fairness; it focuses on the use of coercive violence and its effects on the victims of terror without regard to the status of the perpetrator. Terrorism does not refer to the mutual fear of armed adversaries, but only to acts of intimidating and injuring unarmed, presumably innocent civilians. Therein lies the revulsion over terrorist acts. This definition leaves out the question of motivation. Motives have varied, and so have methods. Many terrorists in our time have no identifiable goals. There are five sources of terrorism—state, religion, protest/revolution, crime and pathology. Only the first three have political motivation.

It is important to start by defining terrorism, because the contemporary environment is extremely inhospitable to reasoned discussion of terrorism, its forms, and the compulsions which produce them. In the US, discourse on the subject is dominated by the preferences of the governments of United States and Israel. Thus, presumed Palestinian/Lebanese terrorist acts in Europe attract massive official and media attention while equally deadly acts of terror here at home go largely unnoticed. These—in case you have missed those one-inch notices in the *Times* or *Post*—have been carried out in recent years mostly by Zionist extremists. Many of them, endowed with the special privilege of dual citizenship, freely travel between the US and Israel; of these quite a few have trained as members of the Israeli army.

The official line in the US today has three broad characteristics. It requires, first, a suspension of reason, suppression of inquiry into causation. It demands an unqualified support for violent and retaliatory response. Thus last December in Yugoslavia, Secretary of State George Shultz went red in the face and pounded the table after his host, the Yugoslav foreign minister, urged him to look at the causes of Palestinian violence. "There is no connection with any cause," Mr. Shultz said, "It's wrong." This article, in a sense, appears in violation of that edict of the US Secretary of State.

There is a second problem: the official line includes only actions by those non-governmental terrorists whose goals or ideologies are officially disapproved by the US and/or the state of Israel. The moral revulsion we are being asked to muster is

selective. We are expected to denounce the Palestinian terrorists, the Lebanese Muslims, the Italian Red Brigades, the Baader-Meinhof of Germany, but not the Nicaraguan contras, nor the South African-sponsored and US-endorsed UNITA, nor even Afghanistan's *mujahidin*, who unlike the Lebanese of similar appellation are rarely referred to in the press as "holy warriors." Yet, these CIA-supported groups are terrorists by any definition of the word.

The third problem is that the dominant approach excludes from consideration the terrorist methods of governing and controlling people. Brutal excesses of client or friendly governments, if they are taken into account at all in the US media and official documents, are referred to euphemistically as violations of human rights, which nicely avoids the word "terrorist."

Ratios of Terror

If we take the last four centuries into account, encompassing the rise of the modern capitalist era, terrorism has been practiced both by ascendant and expansionist groups and by declining and defensive ones, by both official and non-official groups and people. It has been practiced by corporate bodies as well as by members of collectively weak communities. One has been on the offensive, the other reduced to defense—colonizers and colonized, masters and slaves, bosses and workers.

A glance at this history suggests the following conclusions. First, the ratio of human losses inflicted by illegitimate state and state-sanctioned terror, when compared with revolutionary terror or non-official terror, is probably half a million to one.

Secondly, visibility, and recognition, no less than sympathy, are invariably accorded to those victims of terrorism who belong to the dominant, powerful group. Those victims who belong to the weaker community have been historically invisible. Modern times have been filled with unrecorded holocausts, including the great civilizations of the Indians living in the US and in the Western hemisphere—Aztecs, Incas, and Mayas. A larger part of this destruction was wrought by untrammelled state terrorism. It

Editor's Note: This article was adapted from talks given at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and at Mount Holyoke College in early April 1986.



The bones of death squad victims, El Salvador.

Marcello Montecino

is only when the weaker party inflicts a loss on the strong—when a Custer is killed or a Gordon besieged—that we come to know that somewhere out there the weak were contesting the strong over a piece of land, over a right to exist in dignity and with one's own culture.

Thirdly, the last two decades have been notable for the rise in the Third World of murderous neo-fascist regimes—Iran and Guatemala, Zaire and Indonesia, Chile and Argentina, Uruguay and the Philippines, Brazil and Greece. They practiced terrorism that was extra-legal, widespread and often privatized as their primary instrument of staying in power. There was an internal logic to the emergence of these regimes that certainly belongs to the Third World's own wounded psyche and distorted social formation. But there was also an external stimuli to them which came partly from the compulsions of the Nixon Doctrine and partly from multinational corporations' search for export platform countries.

These outlaw states had, and where they are not perceptively tottering still have, the blessing of the US government and the indulgence of the American people. Few saw the hand of terror in the behavior of these governments, though thousands of their citizens have "disappeared" without accounting. Important information is often suppressed, even when the terrorism of the resistance receives wide publicity.* We have seen terrorism selectively, through the lenses of power. Last year, President Reagan

belatedly recognized that state terror does exist. In his July 1985 speech to the American Bar Association, he heroically identified the sources of state terror: "You know who they are—Iran, Libya, North Korea, Cuba, and Nicaragua."

Fourthly, religious zealotry has been a source of terror throughout history. In our time, despite the acknowledged hegemony of the secularist ideal, religion continues to provide the framework for terrorist state and rightwing movements. In Iran, it has served as an excuse for the state-sponsored terrorization of the Baha'is, a minority sect, and in Pakistan for the denial of basic rights to the Ahmadis. In El Salvador, Chile, Brazil and Guatemala, religion has been invoked by scoundrel regimes and by government-sponsored rightwing death squads.

But nowhere has religious zealotry been institutionalized more consistently than in the Zionist movement, especially its right wing; and nowhere in modern times has sacred terror been as consistently sponsored by the state as in Israel. Today, the very survival of the Arabs in Palestine is at stake. They are subject not only to systematic dispossession by the state but also to the daily terrorism of state-supported rightwing zealots. All but one of the examples I have cited here are those of America's allies, and all

*For example, when Dan Mitrione was murdered in Uruguay, few in the press reported the simple fact that he was one of the people from AID engaged in training the Brazilian and Uruguayan security forces in methods of surveillance and suppression including, it is believed, torture. See A.J. Languth, *Hidden Terrors* (NY: Pantheon Press, 1978).

except Iran escape the attention of the media. I am reminded of W.B. Yeats' question: "And what if the Church and the State is the mob that howls at the door?"

The official and media attention in the US is riveted largely on terrorist activities of those on the other side of the ideological boundary. This terrorism does exist and does pose a problem. But we do no justice to its victims, or to understanding, when we do not discriminate its causes, character, and history.

Hostages

Consider the most notorious sort of terrorism, the hijacking and hostage-taking which have come to be associated in popular imagination with Palestinians in particular. Why do so many grow up to be terrorists? The causes are multiple and the cure is more complex than the champions of swift retribution imagine. Even the non-political terrorist is undeterred by the severest punishment. The political terrorist is even more obdurate.

Several factors are crucial. One is the need to be heard. Terrorism is a violent way of expressing long-felt, collective grievances. When legal and political means fail over a long period, a minority of the aggrieved community elicits the sympathy of the majority with violent acts. After Palestine became Israel, in 1948, the Palestinian struggle for self-determination was largely political. Twenty years later, by 1967, they had gained little but refugee doles and a dozen UN resolutions. Then, between 1968-72, the PLO pulled the world up by the ears. Today, no one denies that there is a question of Palestine.

It is no accident that hijacking is the method not of Chinese, Algerian, Cuban, or Vietnamese guerrillas but of a people without a home. And the hijackings ended as the PLO obtained worldwide recognition and a base in Lebanon. By the summer of 1981, when it accepted and observed a US-mediated cease-fire with Israel for eleven months, the PLO resembled other liberation movements. There exists a remarkable parallel between the behavior of the PLO in 1981 and that of the Zionist movement earlier. Following the murder of Lord Moyne by Zionist terrorists, the Zionist movement reached an agreement with the British that opened prospects of a negotiated settlement. The Haganah actively cooperated with the British authorities in preventing terrorist activities by Jewish groups from October 1944 to July 1945, the period known in Zionist history as "the Season." The season ended when the hopes of negotiated settlement dimmed; a wave of terrorism followed. The PLO's 1982 debacle and renewed isolation should have caused thoughtful concern, not rejoicing.

A second fact is this: anger and helplessness produce compulsions toward retributive violence. "I have pounded a few walls myself when I am alone," Ronald Reagan said at a news conference on June 17, during the Lebanese hijacking of the TWA jet; an aide described him as wishing "to kick somebody in the rear end." The "reprisal" of the strong and the "terrorism" of the weak have a similar root. The connection between terror and counter-terror is often direct: "They kept yelling about New Jersey," said Judy Brown of Delmar, NJ, after her release by the Beirut hijackers; "I was afraid to tell them where I was from. Why are they so mad at New Jersey?" It was not the state; it was the US battleship *New Jersey* which had hurled Volkswagen-sized

bombs into villages above Beirut.

Third, the experience of violence at the hands of a stronger party has historically turned victims into terrorists. Battered children often become abusive parents. State terror often breeds private terror. Jewish terrorism in Palestine followed the pogroms and the Holocaust in Europe. The most notorious Zionist terrorist groups—the Stern and Irgun—were youthful immigrants from violently anti-Semitic Eastern Europe and Germany. Similarly, the young Shi'a who hijacked the TWA aircraft had witnessed violence since early childhood; most were probably refugees in Beirut from Israel's bombings and invasions of southern Lebanon. The Palestinians who recently killed and died at the Rome Airport were from the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Fourth, when identifiable targets become available, violence is externalized. When clear-cut external targets are lacking, the violence of under-privileged people tends to be internalized; "pounding the walls" is a metaphor for internecine warfare. What President Reagan said at his June 17th news conference holds true for the Lebanese too: "It is frustrating. But . . . you can't just start shooting without having someone in your gunsight." The Shi'a did not attack Israelis until Israel became the occupying power. And although the civil war in Lebanon had been going on since 1975, the United States came under repeated attack only after Israel's invasion in June 1982, and the US Marine's perceptibly pro-Israeli, pro-Phalangist deployment there.

Fifth, example spreads terrorism. The highly publicized Beirut TWA hijacking was followed by a flurry of airport bombings—hurried, ill-planned, and without goals. The more serious examples are set by governments. International terrorism came in vogue during history's most televised, most visible superpower intervention—the war in Indochina. When practiced and supported by powerful states, terrorism is legitimized as an instrument of attaining political objectives. And today, those who condemn terrorism most are among its primary sponsors.

Sixth, the absence of revolutionary ideology enhances a group's propensity towards international terrorism. Ideologically and territorially-rooted movements—Chinese, Algerian, Vietnamese, Cuban, Angolan, and Nicaraguan—led protracted armed struggles without carrying out such acts as hijacking, and rarely operated outside the contested territorial boundaries. Nor have these countries provided haven to hijackers. The most important reasons for this are the theoretical injunctions against indiscriminate, attention-seeking use of terror. Revolutionary violence tends to be sociologically and psychologically selective. It strikes at widely perceived symbols of oppression—landlords, rapacious officials, repressive armies. It aims at widening the revolutionaries' popular support by freeing their potential constituencies from the constraints of oppressive power.

Oppression and injustice have existed for millenia. Why then this scourge of international terrorism now? Part of the answer lies in modern technology, and its proliferation. Technology provides the physical elements of contemporary terrorism—transportation, coercion, and communication. The airplane is a speedy, vulnerable, and exceptionally manipulable means of transportation. Compact and formidable modern handguns can be deadlier than most 19th century artillery. And the electronic media offers an instant means of communicating with the entire world. When hijackers put the three elements together, they arrange a global hearing. The American Indians never had such an opportunity. Technology has helped to render obsolete the ease with which history's wars were kept invisible. ■