



John K. Bengu

The Root Causes of International Terrorism

A critical assessment on the root causes of international terrorism



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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The literal meaning of the word terror is not particularly instructive in distilling a legal concept of terrorism, since every form of violence is regarded as potentially terror-inspiring to its victim. Disagreement about terrorism runs much deeper than technical disputes about drafting; it reflects doctrinal, ideological, and jurisprudential arguments about who is entitled to exercise violence, against whom, and for what purposes.¹ There should be a clear line between terrorism and other forms of political violence such as riots, revolt, rebellion, war, conflict, uprising, subversion, intervention, guerrilla warfare, and so on.

Terrorism is a premeditated, usually politically motivated, use, or threatened use, of violence, in order to induce a state of terror to its immediate victims, usually for the purpose of influencing another, less reachable audience, such as a government.² This definition engulfs both action, states who might commit 'terrorism from above' (TFA) and sub-national entities (groups and individuals), who might engage in 'terrorism from below' (TFB).³

¹ Ben Saul, Defining Terrorism in International law. Oxford University Press 2006. p. 4.

² Webel Charles, Terror, Terrorism and Human Condition. Palgrave Macmillan 2004. p. 9.

³ Gus Martin, Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues. Saga Publication 2003. pp. 81-112.

Violence in the form of terrorism has existed for more than 2000 years but the “attacks” of 9/11 on the U.S brought international repercussions unlike any previously experienced. Four commercial passenger jet airliners were hijacked by 19 terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda. Two of these civilian airliners were crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City, killing everyone on board and those working in the buildings. The third airliner crashed into the Pentagon, while the fourth crashed into a field near Shanksville after some of its passengers and crew members attempted to retake control of the plane. These “attacks” left 2,974 people dead excluding the 19 hijackers. This incident was extraordinary because it included nationals of over 90 different countries and had an overwhelming effect upon the American people as the majority of casualties were civilians. The Global War against Terrorism (GWAT) was a response to the “attacks” as immediately a broad-based anti-terrorism coalition was formed. This campaign led by the United States and its allies with goal of ending international terrorism by stopping identified terrorist groups and also ending state sponsored terrorism. Despite the vast majority of the world population’s rejection of terrorism and its support for “GWAT”, coming to an agreement on what constitutes terrorism has proven to be almost impossible.

The military invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq to oust the Taliban government and Saddam Hussein without the support of other members of the UN Security Council proves other members prefer the non-military approach to fight international terrorism. ‘International terrorism’ comprises an extremely complex set of phenomena, covering a great diversity of groups with different origins and causes. Identifying these root causes is a complex task and we will not be able to identify one set of root causes that will cover all forms of ‘international terrorism’. Deep-rooted

causes such as prolonged unresolved conflicts act to produce all kinds of social outcomes, of which 'international terrorism' is just one. These 'root causes' are preconditions to 'international terrorism'. The counterpart to such deep-seated and general root causes is what is called a 'trigger cause': those immediate circumstances and events that provoke people to have recourse to terrorist action. Triggering events such as the recent Israeli acts on West Bank have very direct causal relations to terrorist action.

'International terrorism' maybe an extension of violence resulting from conflicts (between different ethno-national groups, between ethnic minorities and governments, between ideological groups and governments, between rival ideological groups etc). The indirect and underlying sources of conflict are significant in understanding specific incidents of 'international terrorism' and certain categories of terrorism.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

An increase in violence acts such as the recent 'Mumbai attacks' that led to the death of 173 people and 308 injured, leads us to question the effectiveness of the counter-terrorism measures implemented after September 11. These increased waves of 'terrorist' attacks around the world require us to question security measures in the future if nothing is done. The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) has not been effective and we need to examine the root causes of 'international terrorism'. This research paper addresses three fundamental key questions; what are the circumstances that provide or act as preconditions for the emergence of international terrorism? Is it possible to reduce international terrorism by influencing these root causes and circumstances? If so, to what extent?

1.3 Hypotheses

This study evaluates the hypotheses that what is singled out as “international terrorism” against the western states is in fact and somehow a reaction to the violence exerted by the “west” and experienced there by the people, and enacted by groups that feel “responsible” for them, hence a reaction to a threat to “human security”

1.4 Significance of the Study

The rampant ‘terrorist’ attacks and the image portrayed by western media on terrorism has influenced public opinion in seeking a solution towards terrorism. Public opinion has shifted away from the Global War on ‘Terrorism’ (GWOT) towards finding lasting solution. While some recognise societal causes such as poverty, prolonged unresolved conflict, political violence and repression as root causes of ‘international terrorism’, many others attribute terrorism to hatred and intolerance, insanity and religious ideology. This study is significant as it examines how these societal problems act as a root cause to ‘international terrorism’.

1.5 Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to determine if there exist root causes of ‘international terrorism’. The specific objective of the research was:

1. To have a critical examination on structural and cultural violence as the root causes of ‘international terrorism’;
2. To examine counter terrorism measures implemented by states and the international community in eradicating these root causes of ‘international terrorism’.

1.6 Scope and Limitation

This study seeks to examine the root causes of 'international terrorism' such as structural causes, motivational causes, facilitator (or accelerator) causes and triggering causes. It also examines measures taken to redress the root cause of 'international terrorism'.

Limitation involves problems encountered in carrying out the study since primary sources of information could not be obtained.

1.7 Literature Review

There was limited substantive literature on this field of study until the recent emergence and attention by international terrorist threats. The established literature focuses mainly on localized terrorist threats, rather than international terrorism. It is true that various aspects of terrorism have been tackled in recent years, including civil violence and suicide bombing carried out by the IRA in Northern Ireland, ETA in Spain and the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany. A few exceptions such as in Krueger and Laitin (2003) find that GDP per capita and GDP growth rate are not significant predictors of international terrorism. Other studies like Krueger and Maleckova (2003) go further against conventional wisdom, which assumes poverty is not a source of international terrorism, concluding that the more educated and wealthier Palestinians are actually more likely to be terrorists than poorer individuals.

Recent works by Abadie (2004) were able to make significant improvements on previous work because they show an inclusive measure of terrorism as his dependent variable. Abadie (2004) chooses country level index data assessing the combined risk of both domestic terrorism within a country and international

terrorism on that country's territory at home and interest abroad rather than using the U.S Department of State data. However his findings conclude similarly to earlier international terrorism studies that GDP per capita has little to do with terrorism and that political freedom is the most important determinant of such acts. Furthermore, other hypothesized predictors of international terrorism such as GDP growth and unemployment level were not investigated.

The article published by Martha Crenshaw "The Cause of Terrorism" 1981 highlights the difficulty of finding general explanation for terrorism and concludes that it is possible to distinguish different types of variable, as a starting point for further research on causal relations. Crenshaw differentiates among three groups of variable: strategic, structural and psychological emphasizing the idea that terrorism is a product of rational political choice. Conceptual distinctions are drawn with the division of structural variables into preconditions (root causes) and precipitants (trigger causes). The preconditions were divided and classified into permissive factors that provide opportunities for terrorism to occur, and situations that serve as direct motives for terrorism campaign.⁴ Although this article offers ideas for further research, Jeffrey Ian Ross' "Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism: Towards a Causal Mode" (1993) identifies three prominent categories of causes of terrorism, comparable to those of Crenshaw, namely structural and psychological causes, as well as those related to the concept of "rational choice". His work can be considered valuable in describing terrorism, but lacks the necessary tools for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. Rakesh Gupta (1989) and Charles Kegley (2003) "India's Security Problems in the Nineties" tries to identify relevant leads for an

⁴ Martha Crenshaw, (1981) "The Causes of Terrorism". Comparative Politics, Vol. 13, No.4, pp.381

organizational theory of causation using India as a case study. Gupta's work expands on elements of socio-economic causation, legitimating process and identity movement. Kegleg's edited volume divides the subject of terrorism into three categories of analysis. He lays specific emphasis on the importance of initial characterization of terrorism, pointing out how its definition will consequently shape the resulting conclusion of its causes.

Gupta, D.K (2004) "Exploring Roots of Terrorism" seeks an understanding as to why people engage in such acts in the name of a group based on ethnicity, religion, nationalism or ideology. His arguments are rooted in economic and socio-psychological dimensions of human motivations. He points out that "political violence takes place when a leader gives voice to the frustration by formulating a well defined social construction of collective identity and paints in vivid colours the image of "us" and "them". He concludes that political, economic and religious grievances are not in themselves factors, which lead to terrorism. Toro Bjorgo's "Root Cause of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and a Way Forward" (2005) focuses on terrorism and political violence and subsequently shed lights on its causes.

Numerous international conferences have been held to further develop the knowledge on the subject in addition to published books and articles.

1.8 Methodology

My research method involved Quantitative data analysis based on existing literature, reviews of books, articles and documents. Since primary sources of information such as interviews and questionnaires could not be used. Primary and secondary sources of information such as books, articles, journals and government documents from various organisations and departments were utilised.