

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TERRORISM

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*While nothing is easier than to denounce the evil-doer,  
nothing is more difficult than to understand him.*

*- Dostoyevsky*

The events of 11 September 2001 in the United States have focused our minds acutely on terrorism, far more than ever in the past. In a way, this is surprising, as terrorism has been around for hundreds of years, and there are perhaps many other countries and societies that have suffered substantively more from it during the course of their respective histories.

With all the spotlight on the Al Qaeda these days, one has the tendency to ignore the exceptionally long list of organizations that have practiced terrorism over the years. The Zealots go back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, the Hashashin to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. In modern times alone there is an extraordinary list, ranging from the FLN in Algeria, the FARC in Colombia, the Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, the Bader Meinhof in Germany, the IRA in Ireland, the Irgun and Stern in Israel, the Mao-Mao in Kenya, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the Hizballah and the Hamas in Palestine, the Shining Path in Peru, the ETA in Spain, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the PKK in Turkey, the Symbionese Liberation Army in the USA, to name just a few from an endless list.

So who are all these “terrorists” and why do they expend so much effort in the implementation of their objectives ?

First, the definition. The United Nations has struggled for almost forty years now to agree on some sort of definition of terrorism, and has still not succeeded. The reason is deceptively simple – one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter. History is replete with the story of those who were successful in their national liberation struggles, and became heroes in their independence movements. History is equally replete with the story of those who failed, and were labeled as terrorists. It is tempting to see the dividing line not in their actions, but rather in their successes or failures. It would be interesting to see how the “other side” would have labelled George Washington or Charles de Gaulle, had they failed in their respective endeavours.

The State Department of the United States has its own definition, which reads as, “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”. This is obviously a loaded definition. The emphasis on “sub-national groups” is meant to eliminate any application of this definition to excesses by agents

of state, whether in uniform or otherwise. This fits in with the current official position under which actions by defense or occupation forces against civilian targets become understandable, but actions by resistance groups against occupation forces are reprehensible.

A third definition is simpler, namely, actions which endanger or kill innocent civilians. However, this immediately becomes applicable to agents of state. Ever so many innocent civilians have been killed in wars in so many countries, either deliberately, or due to the use of indiscriminate tactical weapons like carpet bombs or butterfly mines, etc. In most cases these civilian deaths are euphemistically described afterwards as "collateral damage".

The Non-Aligned Movement examined this issue some years ago, and agreed that terrorist actions by agents of state, or state sponsored terrorism, constituted "the worst form of terrorism". That voice was lost in the wilderness.

Second, the motivation. Much thought has been given to the psychology of the terrorist, and to his profile. On the one hand, there was the classification into sick forms of behaviour, that of the psychopath, or the fanatic. Then there was the physiological examination into terrorist behaviour by identifying the absence of chemicals like norepinephrine or acetylcholine or some endorphins in their bodies. Then there was the theory that all terrorists were brain-washed ideologically into abnormal and suicidal behaviour, like that of the LTTE, which still holds statistical pride of place among suicide bombers.

Only recently have some explanations gone deeper into motivations. A recent State Department study on the mind-set of terrorists, commissioned after the events of last year, mentions rather casually that terrorists are, (a) unable to achieve goals by conventional means, (b) try to send an ideological message by terrorizing the general public, and (c) target symbolic or representative items in the achievement of that objective.

That is something that Margolin and Knutson had discovered years ago, namely, that much terrorist behavior is a response to the frustration of various political, economic, and personal needs and objectives. This was then amplified further as "rage and helplessness over the lack of alternatives".

What are the reasons for this intensity of rage and helplessness? It is after all highly abnormal for relatively well brought up, well educated, and technically qualified individuals to embark on actions which they know will inevitably culminate in suicide or certain death. What then is the idealism or nationalism that moves them so deeply.

There are peoples who have endured brutal occupation now for three generations or more. There are peoples whose fundamental beliefs are anchored in social democracy, but who are condemned to live in absolute monarchies, frequently bolstered and sustained from abroad. There are peoples whose inherent search for liberty and freedom and self-determination has been stymied by the foreign policy interests of others. There are peoples whose deep desire to participate in their local political processes is drowned by their own petty dictators.

Third, the response. Perhaps we should not be examining the psychology of terrorism at all, but rather the psychology of our own response to this situation. The frustrations of the down-trodden and wretched of this earth are perhaps

understandable, but our inability to see the obvious and to empathise with them is not. We have after all turned our face away from some of the most festering denials of human rights for years, if not for centuries. Even the magnificent social revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, with all their brave declarations about the equality of man and the inalienability of their fundamental rights did not prevent the very formulators of these impressive principles from indulging in slavery or colonialism or racism in subsequent decades and centuries.

We have gone even further. Dictatorial regimes have been propped up in many parts of the world against the desires of their own populations, not because of any abiding commitment to these countries, but rather in the advancement of our own foreign policy objectives. We have had the intellectual arrogance to choose and impose leaders on others, and to justify this on the grounds of freedom and security, not their security, but our own. How do we possibly imagine that history will just forget such excesses that are committed in the name of liberty and freedom.

It is absolutely essential for us to realise that most of our policies are perceived elsewhere, either as a mere prolongation of the status-quo in areas where change is necessary, or as a mere prolongation of injustices in different regions, in both cases in the interests of our own security concerns and our foreign policy and economic objectives. The two tectonic forces that have shaped our world over the past thousand years, namely, the progressive spread of democratic thought, and the expansion of economic opportunity as a result of the shrinkage of space, have both created an atmosphere of earnest anticipation, about justice, about opportunity, about development, about social balance. Alas, we have then been found lacking in the implementation of our standards. Our practices fall so short of our precepts. This just cannot endure. Unless we understand that the principles that we have identified and enunciated must be truly and impartially implemented in a global village, the frustrations that we have seen in recent times will only increase. Our feeble attempt to analyse the psychology of others will not help. This is not a North-South divide, or a Clash of Civilisations, or a simple differentiation between “us” and “them”. It is basically a divide between “us” and “us”, between our own moral principles and our own amoral actions. We have to resolve that dilemma ourselves without pointing fingers at others.

No, it is not the psychology of the terrorist that needs to be examined, but the psychology of our own response to a situation of our own creation.

*Honi soit qui mal y pense.*