

EXPLORING THE NATURE AND STRUCTURE OF TERRORISM—A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Terrorism versus peace is an often-debated topic around the world especially after the 9/11 incident. However, there is no agreed upon definition of terrorism among scholars due to difference in relative philosophies and outlooks. This article is an attempt to explore the various approaches towards and manifestations of the term terrorism. The nature as well as the specific and general features of terrorism coupled with legal perspective, its conduct and principles have been analysed. Furthermore, the impact of the menace of terrorism on the civil society has also been highlighted. It was concluded that, besides many other reasons, most of the time, the religious or ethnic orientations are often misinterpreted for achieving vested interests against individuals, groups, and states, despite the fact that nearly all religions stands for peace. This is so true in case of Islam where the very name means peace together with a number of injunctions for the adherents to abstain from atrocity and extremism. It was suggested that all forms of terrorism, whether it is on individual or group basis or state-basis (as state terrorism also exacerbates the situation); it needs to be eradicated from the face of the earth. Terrorism jeopardises the very fabric of society and violates noble human values and disrupts peace and tranquility.

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Under the Islamic injunctions, homicide is strictly prohibited and is considered as *Haraam* act.¹ Such a glimpse in The Pakistan Penal Code is, a murderer is liable to death sentence both in the Divine laws as well as in man-made laws.²

Under Islamic injunctions ‘*Qissas*’ (retaliation or reparation) is a legal process for such crimes, like homicide, genocide, and is legally allowed as well as socially approved and is meant for the general welfare of humanity.³ On the other hand terrorism is absolutely destructive concept. It has challenged the very survival of the human family around the world. An effort has been made in the next part of this article to explore the philosophical diversions/dissentions of this issue at length.

1.1 Terrorism: etymology and meaning

The term ‘Dahshat Gardi’ has its roots in Persian and Urdu languages that stand for spreading fear and harassment.⁴ Its synonym in Arabic is ‘Rahbat’, ‘Rahba’ and ‘Rahbaa’.⁵ Any ruler who is indulged in terrorising the citizens is called ‘Al Arhaabi’. The official orders of such rulers are called ‘Al Hukmul-Arhaabi’.⁶ In English the synonym for the word ‘dahshat’ is ‘terror’ and ‘dahshat gardi’ is for ‘terrorism’. Terrorism is a process in which violence is used for gaining political objectives or to compel a state to act accordingly because of the fear it creates among the masses is called terrorism’.⁷

In almost all languages there is a particular word for ‘terror’ or ‘fear’. Hence, laws are framed that defines acts of terror and prescribes punishment for terrorist elements. However, the word terrorism is often misused being; there is no consensus-based definition of the term or any clear contours of terrorism being identified. It seems to be a deliberate

stance of the people, rooted in their differences in outlooks and opinions.⁸

The Dictionary meaning of the word is given below:

Terrorist:

There is no consensus-based definition of the term terrorist but generally those activities of autonomous and semi-government organizations which have political aim. The term has negative connotations, yet in certain cases like the political endeavour of Marquis to over through the Vichy Government of France it is regarded as positive activity. That is the reason that people carrying such activities are considered as terrorists in one's eye but freedom fighters for another. Sometimes, instead of semi-government organization the violent activities of Governments also fall in terrorism i.e. Gestapo, K.G.B and Estate Sali which are used either to intimidate citizen or are involved against minorities. Similarly, violent activities in other form whether directly or indirectly are also termed as 'State Terrorism'.

Presently, states around the world that possess different cultural ideologies are condemning one state or the other for these activities which they themselves perpetrate. USA during the presidency of Ronald Regan was condemning different states specially Labia for terrorism while on other hand it was supporting terrorists against Nicaragua Government although both had diplomatic relation. But one should not be astonished at this contrast because one should keep in mind that American dollar bear the picture of Gorge Washington a man who had a history of violent

activities, hence considered by one school of thought as a terrorist and at the same time freedom fighter by another.⁹

In nut shell there is no single and agreed upon the term of terrorism hence, the controversy over definitions of the term. So the same action may be an act of terrorism for a people yet the same will be an act of heroism for others. Addressing the United Nations General Assembly, Nelson Mandela, expounded: this is very difficult to differentiate between terrorist and freedom fighter because there was a time when I was considered as terrorist but now I am the ruler of a state.¹⁰

The term terrorism is frequently used in modern era but this is an independently explainable entity. Terrorism can be distinguished from freedom movements.

In Encyclopaedia Britannica, the term is elaborated thus, ‘the organized use of terror and the unforeseeable violence against states, general public or even individuals to achieve usually political objectives’.¹¹ The World Book Encyclopaedia so describes the term:

...the use or the threats of using force to create a fearful situation. Terrorists are usually involved in murdering and kidnapping people, hijacking aeroplanes, setting public property on fire and committing other heinous crimes, however, the terrorists are distinct from ordinary or routine criminals. Usually criminals want monetary or personal gain. Contrary to that the terrorist commits such crimes to achieve political gains.¹²

It is pertinent to mention that even the United States and her allies are confused with the use of the term terrorism. Noam Chomsky’s (2001)

lecture on terrorism was summed up by 'The Frontline' thus: Chomsky has differentiated it into formal meaning as well as propaganda as per the US official document; terrorism is using force for gaining political, socio cultural, religious or ideological goals. The writer admits that US has misused the term for propaganda to achieve political aims and in due course of time those who contradict the US stance are termed as terrorists.¹³

The above discourse explains to some extent why the so called war on terror is considered by many learned people as fraud and fake war. It is pertinent to cite here the definition of terrorism given by FBI, 'The illegal use of force against masses, destruction of public property, so as to pressurise governments, people or act of violence for political aim by a group of people or a person who belongs to a state or it may be beyond national level'.¹⁴ Alexander J, (n.d), a renowned scholar on terrorism, describes the term as: Illegal use of force against personal property, state assets or general masses or to compel the opponents to attain the pre-decided aim.¹⁵

However, this definition is deficient as it limits the scope of terrorism to general public only while certain acts against a declared enemy may also be termed as terrorist activity. This definition talks more about the general nature or form of terrorism.¹⁶ Culterhook R, (2011) opines that terrorism is a display of power to the onlooker to be terrorized besides damaging the target. Further, he says using violence against civilians or public installations for achieving political gains constitute terrorism.¹⁷ This phenomenon has been beautifully explained in an ancient Chinese proverb which states that to kill someone in such a manner to frighten thousand others.¹⁸ Jackenz B, (n.d), asserts that, the word terrorism connotes activities wherein either the procedure adopted

is wrong or those who are targeted have legal protection and whether it is perpetrated by state or individuals.¹⁹

This definition highlights two outstanding aspects: the illegality of using force and targeting those who are legally protected, or targeting innocent and those who have not harmed one. An act of terrorism is subject to the condition that it must use illegal and inhuman means to target victims who are innocent. However, this does not clearly distinguish ordinary crimes from terrorism.²⁰

Jackenz B, (n.d) a leading Western legal expert discusses the concept of terrorism in the following manner: Terrorism consists of using force and usually has some aims. Its targets are civilians with political aims. Terrorist attacks are attention grabbing and usually following by owning the attack. Such attack have a psychological impacts and it is more than the damage done.²¹ The positive aspect of Jackens viewpoint is that, it highlights some key aspects of terrorism however, it has some drawbacks such as this explanation covered those aspects of terrorist activities that are peculiar to routine crimes; therefore, it cannot be entirely relied upon as a conclusive definition of terrorism. This issue has been further illuminated below.

1.2. Specific features of terrorism

- All forms of terrorism essentially constitute crimes
- All forms of terrorism contain use of force
- Dynamics of terrorism is always political in nature
- Actions are carried out in such a way as to ensure maximum attention
- The long term psychological impact of the act of terrorism is far more dangerous than the immediate physical damage.

1.3. General features of terrorism

- Most forms of terrorism violate norms of war
- Mostly innocent, people are targeted
- Perpetrators are mostly members of an organization
- After commission of the act, the terrorist claims responsibility for the act.²²

It is pertinent to mention here that, terrorist activities be necessarily from an organized group: such activities can be from individuals or even the states. Second, claimant for the terrorist activities is also not a pre-condition because often fake claimants comes to the fore for shouldering the responsibility. Furthermore, claiming responsibility usually leads to displeasure in the form of public opinion hence usually avoided.²³

As per the draft of the International Law Commission, in which a legal code for peace and security was framed where terrorism was equated with aggression. The mentioned policy document reveals that if officials of any government who are involved to instigate or support acts of terror in neighboring or any other state, also constitute terrorism.²⁴ It would serve the purpose more appropriately to mention the views of various Muslim thinkers on terrorism and to arrive at a more impartial and fair conclusion.

Ahmed K, (2002) opines about terrorism:

It is a way of using force, as a consequence of having a sense of deprivation. It is carried out not for just personal gains but primarily for turning the attention of the targeted enemy towards a particular demand. This is probably

the reason terrorism is sometimes considered a weapon of the weak against the stronger one.²⁵

Further the same writer says,

The use of force can be justified when it is meant for establishing peace, when its objectives are based on the general welfare of humanity, such as dealing with criminals or war-mongering outfits. Force may be used for establishing law and order rather than for committing atrocities.²⁶

Farooq²⁷ believes of terrorism as an act where non combatant common masses are targeted while, Ghamidi (2001) adds something more to the meaning of terrorism by saying that, ‘surprise attack on non combatants will come under the sphere of terrorism’.²⁸ He also says that surprise attacks against armed forces will also be declared as terrorism.²⁹ This opinion leaves itself exposed to interpretation that acts of terrorism can be justified against a declared enemy; while undeclared attacks are to be acts of terror. On the basis of this argument, Ghamidi excludes US attack of Afghanistan from the sphere of terrorism. Further, he thinks that general masses are not intentionally targeted.³⁰

This view is open to criticism as it will surely exclude US Invasions on Iraq. Similarly India’s atrocities in Jammu and Kashmir, which is a clear example of state terrorism, would also be excluded from the circle of the definition of terrorism, despite the argument based on assertions of many Western intellectuals, who think about this as instances of state terrorism.³¹ Secondly, Ghamidi’s concept of terrorism is also far from being comprehensive enough because if surprise attacks be considered as terrorism, declared attacks may also be counted as terrorism.³²

This point of view is elaborated by al Hassan (2002) as,

...even in the word “declared” some aspects need consideration such as the combatant be explicitly warned before taking action. The combatants be given ample opportunity to negotiate or even surrender and in case the opponent is non combatant, even then they may be granted a chance to escape for the sake of their life, property and honour.³³

However, despite this clarification Ahmed K, (2008) thinks that:

...if a few activists of an organization attack an educational institution such as a girls college and threaten its personnel and students to vacate the building, otherwise, they will be killed; and later the activists actually do what they say, but with no casualty, even then such would be an act terrorism. Similarly in case of announced military operation some combatants and non combatants, who are assigned duties in schools and hospitals who distribute food or medicine cannot be excluded of terrorism.³⁴

An attack against the opponent is not a matter of announcement but it must be confirmed as whether it is intentional or unintentional, legitimate or illegitimate. This is to be decided keeping in consideration the related factors. Such issues can be addressed through an independent body under the UN umbrella.³⁵

Ahmed K, (2008) says that terrorism is the unlawful use or threat of using force, against legally protected people.³⁶ This definition seems relatively more encompassing yet it does not clearly demarcate between routine criminal acts and terrorism.³⁷ Ahmed K, (2008) does not consider force as a pre-requisite for routine crimes but he believes that terrorist activities do necessarily resort to the misuse of force.³⁸ Terrorist activities

are characterised by the prime objective of spreading fear among the common people.³⁹

2. International Legal Perspective on Terrorism

Despite no consensus-based international definition of terrorism, yet some acts are universally agreed to be acts of terrorism (Mushtaq A, 2008). Such acts can be:

- i. attacking civilians and civil infrastructure
- ii. hijacking aeroplanes
- iii. Kidnapping civilians
- iv. Attacking the opponent in civilian set up
- v. Using chemical weapons.⁴⁰

On the basis of above discussion it can safely be concluded that terrorist actions are those that are meant for gaining vested political interests by targeting public and public installations that result in human loss.

Terrorism disturbs society. It involves crimes against humanity, destruction of public and private property, and targeting civil and military assets and persons to instil fear in the public. None of these activities are permissible in any religion. Some of the cherished values of Islam are presented below:

2.1. Respect for human life

Islam is strictly against bloodshed. Not to speak of massacre; Islam prohibits the wilful assassination of a single person.

...if any one slew a person ... it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.⁴¹

Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) of peace and mercy says,
...do not aspire for a war with the enemy and
pray to Allah for peace ... If perforce you have

to fight the enemy, then adopt patience and perseverance.⁴²

3. The Main Objectives:

In nearly all cases the objectives of terrorism are governed by material gains ranging from political, economic, socio-cultural dominance to regional hegemony.⁴³

Terrorism is ethics free. It has no norms in the positive sense there is no discrimination between the innocent and the culprit. Its aim is to frighten the general masses as well as the target. Islam does not approve of such acts. Jihad of the military version is allowed in Islam as a last tool in such circumstances where any civilised society would also allow resorting to.⁴⁴

4. The Conduct and Principles of Terrorism

Since the known human history, war related norms have been framed however; many countries today violate these norms and principles. Similarly there are certain religious injunctions regarding this phenomenon. For example, as per injunctions of Islam, the following pre-conditions are levelled:

- i. Absence of greed, lust, and desire for worldly or material gains.⁴⁵
- ii. Never to reject or disown the treaty that is one mutually concluded between the warring parties.⁴⁶
- iii. No war be waged for personal aggrandizement.⁴⁷
- iv. Inviting towards Islam and offering peace to the enemy.⁴⁸
- v. No permission for surprise attacks.⁴⁹
- vi. Honouring International conventions and agreements.⁵⁰
- vii. Conforming the morality in all circumstances.⁵¹
- viii. In keeping with the situation, accepting peace proposals.⁵²
- ix. Abstention from initiating war during the holy months.⁵³

Keeping these cherished principles, it becomes imperative for all the Muslims in an Islamic state to follow the orders of the ruler in letter and spirit otherwise any war may fall out of the jurisdiction of the term *Jihad Fi Sabil-e-Allah*.⁵⁴

The above discourse leads one to conclude that as is the concept of terrorism, so is the way the acts of Terrorism operate. However, terrorist, seems to believe ‘everything is fair in love and war’, and totally disrespects and violates all human norms and standards of war, hence it is a menace for the human family and cannot be justified on any ground.

5. Impact of Terrorism on Civil Society:

Terrorism bears always negative impact on civilization and societal structures. It creates chaos, disorder, and a dogging sense of insecurity among the masses. Large scale destruction masses are carried out and even other living and non-living things are destroyed consequently. Business and social activities suffers. Such situation stops the growth of human civilization. Terrorism is like cancer in the human body and need to be eradicated on emergency basis. Same is the case of human society where anti-social elements are to be eradicated from the social structure. This is one of the cherished stances of Islam to establish peace at any cost, even if the process may involve the use of sword despite the fact that Islam has never ever been trigger-happy. Allah Almighty puts out the fire of war every time kindled by the war-happy elements. *Jihad* (a special practice in Islam) is therefore, carried out to eradicate such cancerous elements of society in the larger motive of maintaining peace for the human family.⁵⁵

Viewing the devastating ugly face of terrorism around the world, it can safely be concluded that wherever there is a vein of terrorism, there is heavy human loss—ranging from psychological embarrassment to financial, infrastructural, social, and cultural recession. In the face of this

it is the foremost responsibility of every human being—at least ideally—to contribute to making a more peaceful world. Those sitting in the power corridors around the world have an obligation to practically strive for the establishment and maintenance of peace.

Conclusion

Defining terrorism is no doubt a difficult task, as it has multiple layers and every definition is supposed to address all these layers. Terrorism may be in the form of individual manifestation or in collective form. It may be from the side of a state, organization or even an individual. However, the common factor in all definitions is the unjust, unwarranted threatening or use of force against humanity under any pretext. In the light of the above-mentioned definitions, for practical purposes the following definition is presented, “terrorism is the use or the threat of using force—in individual, group, or state capacity—against a person, group, community or state for bereaving the same from their fundamental as well as subsidiary rights to: existence, growth, and development. It includes indiscriminate activities like: killing, bombing, kidnapping, torturing etc. against general public or disrupting social order for achieving vested interests—such that goes against the cherished human norms and values”. Truculent and warring attitudes are inherent to man. War and peace are the two innate instincts of man, hence can be traced in earliest known human civilization. That is why it has been addressed by nearly all societies from time to time. Most of the wars in human history are fought for personal aggrandizement or any other material gain. The bones of contention in most of such wars were and still are: show of power, expansionism, political and economic gains, or even vindictiveness. Governed by such selfish emotions majority of wars do not conform to the internationally approve norms of war, such as:

surprise attacks, breach of peace treaties etc. Consequently such wars have incurred irreparable injury and misery to the human family.

Terrorism—in all its manifestations—is an evil; the cause of human sufferings. Terrorist hear no civilised norms or standards; terrorism is carried out by anti-social, anti-state and anti-civilization elements. Terrorism jeopardises the existence of human society and violates the cherished norms of humanity and disrupts peace and tranquility.

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