

Terrorism and "compellence"

by Michael Wallack

Terrorism is a form of political violence that is now difficult to examine free from preconceptions. The term is used to refer to the most despicable, morally repugnant and fearsome acts. The consequence of being so labeled, whether for an individual, an organization or a national government, is to become the object of the deepest enmity. This is the ideological content of the term as it used by the political elites of Western democracy, by the mass media, and by most citizens.

Discussions of the use of terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy cannot be entirely free from these ideological presuppositions. Some reference must always be made to its normative content, some awareness must be maintained that in discussing terrorism we are considering the brutally violent death of ordinary people for the sake of political goals. But at the same time we must be careful not to accept at face value judgments about what is to count as terrorism. We must be careful not to omit to call some kinds of political violence terrorism, simply because they are not usually referred to in that way.

Terror as technique

Once the ideological character of references to terrorism is understood, the definitional problem need not be a serious one. Terrorism is a form of political violence that uses the publicity and ferocity of its acts to amplify their effects. The goal of political terror is to coerce decision-makers by threatening a politically important stratum of the population with violence that cannot be effectively limited by security measures provided by the political elites. Terrorist acts must be dramatic, clearly identified as having a political goal, and frightening, if they are to have maximum effect. The power displayed in terrorist acts is not in itself sufficient to accomplish the political objectives sought, nor do terrorists expect to convert the target population or political elite to their own way of thinking. The goal is to use the psychological effects of the terrorist acts to coerce the political decision-makers into changing their policy.

Because fear of violent death (terror) is a general rather than exceptional fact in war, and because the death of innocents (i.e., noncombatants) is now common, the moral distinctions that we have relied upon to differentiate morally acceptable from morally blamable political violence are now difficult to draw. Since World War II, when the Western democracies used mass bombings of civilian populations to attempt to weaken the resolve of enemy populations and leaders, the distinction between combatants and noncombatants has not been one that could be used consistently and in good faith by Western political elites. With the advent of the nuclear age, this distinction has virtually collapsed. What remains to those who would attempt to distinguish the morally blamable from the excusable acts of violence is the moral

value of the goals and the necessity of the acts to accomplish them. But this moral standpoint — that the ends may justify any means — is the very one offered by terrorists in their own defence. The moral perspective from which we respond to terrorism is clouded at best.

Terrorism as show

Terrorism is particularly costly to democratic, urban, industrial societies. Our cities are filled with opportunities for massive, highly visible, vicious random violence. They have not been designed to be protected from such attacks and cannot be effectively protected if they are to function efficiently. And, of course, in our open societies terrorist acts cannot be hidden from view.

Television newscasts, with their penchant for visually dramatic and simple stories, are the ideal means of communication from the perspective of the terrorist. Politicians who have come to power and who govern using television as their primary means of contact with their electorate, are thereby virtually constrained to accept the importance of terrorist acts that dominate the news even when it is not in their interests to do so.

In contrast to the democracies, industrialized autocracies whose elites rule by means of their monopoly of coercion and reward, whose communication facilities are part of the state apparatus, whose borders are closed, are much less at risk from dissident terror.

Terrorism as Tool

Because terrorism enlarges power, and because it is apt to be particularly damaging to political democracies, it is a form of violence that may be commonly adopted by Third World polities and organizations in times of conflict with the Western democracies. For these polities are almost without other means to advance their interests when they are in conflict with those of the industrialized world. A few can offer or threaten to withhold resources or military bases, a few others can look for Soviet or other such aid or use the leverage of local conflicts to improve their bargaining positions, but most cannot realistically threaten Western interests, when non-coercive diplomacy fails.

State sponsored terrorism is attractive to some Third world elites because it fills a gap in their foreign policy capabilities. But in addition to the fact that these states have

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