The Changing Dynamics of Global Terrorism

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Abstract

Commentary on terrorism has underestimated the role of sponsoring states and great power destabilisation, giving rise to gross errors of assessment. Mythmaking and a range of distortions have resulted in flawed policies and irrational interventions. Deliberate provocation of hysteria about the 'rising threat of terrorism' is contrafactual and has been used as a bogey to justify unilateral interventions by great powers, inflicting appalling human costs. The reality is, global Islamist terrorism is past its 'half-life' and is declining. Nevertheless, the circumstances that have animated this, and earlier waves of terrorism, persist and, on many parameters, have worsened, creating the likelihood of future and potentially more disruptive waves of terror.

Terrorism has, for decades now, been wrongly assessed as a

movement against states by non-state entities, using tactics of irregular warfare, particularly the intentional and often indiscriminate targeting of civilians / non-combatants. The focus, consequently, has been on various terrorist formations that execute kinetic operations against target societies and states. Such a paradigm of assessment has led to tremendous errors of response and strategy, undermining the target state's reactions to the challenge of terrorism in all its *avatars,* often with catastrophic consequences. The point that has been substantially neglected within this framework of analysis is the near-ubiquitous role of sponsoring states in terrorist movements that have succeeded in attaining a certain scale and lethality, and in absence of any effective action against such supporting states, tactical responses against terrorist groups can be frustratingly unproductive.

Crucially, the role of the 'great powers' through the Cold War, and of various states, most prominently the United States (US), Pakistan and the West Asian regimes, and also increasingly other players, after the collapse of Soviet Union has been pivotal in creating and sustaining terrorist movements.

There has, moreover, been a persistent orchestration of hysteria and an absence of objectivity in evaluation of terrorist movements. In particular, a great deal of analytic misdirection and mythmaking has characterised the terrorism / counter-terrorism discourse across the world. Among the most significant and obvious cases in point, and one that illustrates the diverse patterns of distortion that have long afflicted assessments, have been the Islamic State (IS), also Daesh, formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), also Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which have throughout been based on distortions and deliberate falsification. IS itself consistently exaggerated both its excesses and its victories. The truth is, it rampaged across regions of disorder and its initial 'conquests' were of areas under the control of other fragmented non-state armed formations. Where it confronted state forces, as in Mosul, it found an adversary terrorised by the wide propagation of videos documenting tortures, crucifixions and mass executions, and unwilling to defend Sunni majority areas. The most dramatic instance of this was Mosul, where a state force of two Divisions (30,000 men), armed to the hilt with tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery, attack helicopters and a more than sufficient arsenal of small arms, simply abandoned their weapons and fled in the face of a tiny rag tag bunch of under 1,500 Daesh fighters, who rode into town in open pickup trucks.[1]

However, the moment IS hit the sectarian (Shia) and ethnic (Kurdish) fault lines, its advances stopped and the performance of Daesh fighters has been far from exemplary wherever they met with any determined opposition.

The myth of Daesh power also augmented when an ever-expanding coalition of Western and Arab states engaged in a half-hearted and ambivalent fight against the terrorists, even as it sought to provide the group, and various other armed formations, with operational spaces and capabilities to weaken the Assad regime in Syria. Western and Arab ambitions to secure 'regime change' in Syria substantially fuelled Daesh power and terror. Lieutenant General David Deptula, who ran the US air war against Al Qaeda and

the Taliban in Afghanistan, argued in September 2014, "ISIL can be paralysed from the air rapidly", but that the coalition air campaign against the group was a "drizzle", whereas what was needed was a "thunderstorm".[2] Meanwhile, convoys of oil tankers transported crude oil from Daesh-held territories into Turkey, where they were processed and exported, generating millions of dollars a week for the terrorist group, allegedly with the direct involvement of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's family, as well as through Kurdish held areas.[3]

To distant analysts, however, it appeared that Daesh had the capacity to resist the combined force of a global alliance of some of the most powerful nations of the world. This myth was quickly exploded with the unambiguous entry of Russia into the fight in Syria, and the Daesh legend and state quickly disintegrated in the face of a relentless succession of reverses. Significantly, Russia's entry coincided with a chain of Daesh or Daesh inspired attacks against Western targets, and, abruptly, the resolve and response of the Western alliance was also transformed, with far more effective action directed against IS.

It is necessary to recognise, here, the centrality of Western fatalities to any assessment of the 'international' dangers constituted by a terrorist formation. As long as terrorists inflict fatalities in states outside the Western cultures, movements are dismissed as local, as consequences of domestic mis-governance or 'state terror', or as 'freedom struggles'. The moment significant Western fatalities occur; we discover the overwhelming menace of the 'global threat of terror'. Individual incidents are also weighted very differently in terms of who is killed. An exceptionally dramatic example of this was the Charlie Hebdo attack, in which 12 French citizens were killed in Paris on 07January 2015. World leaders descended in unprecedented numbers on Paris, to march, hand in hand, at the head of a mammoth crowd chanting "I am Charlie Hebdo", to demonstrate sympathy, solidarity and their will to fight against terrorism.[4] The world media – led, naturally, by the dominant western media – went into frenzy about the threat of 'Islamic terror'. Significantly, between 03 and 07 January 2015, (the latter date coinciding with the Charlie Hebdo incident), Boko Haram reportedly slaughtered "over 2,000" people at Baga, in north eastern Nigeria, but few are even aware of this incident.[5]

Once Daesh had suffered a succession of defeats, losing the entire territory it once held under its quasi-state or deemed 'caliphate', another pattern of mythmaking emerged, once again feeding exaggerated and hysterical fears across the world: the idea that an even more dangerous *avatar,* IS 2.0 and even, in later writings, IS 3.0, had come into existence, constituting an even "more virulent threat"[6] to global peace than it did when it controlled over 100,000 square kilometres of territory at peak, and exercised control over an estimated 12 million people.[7] These 'hip' labels catch on quickly, particularly in much of derivative and uncritical non-Western commentary, and few question how the 'tattered rump'[8] of a defeated terrorist organisation becomes version '2.0' or '3.0', after having lost its sway over vast territories, populations and resources and, crucially, after being widely delegitimised by a humiliating route?

Moreover, Daesh was, no doubt, a terrorist organisation; but its identity cannot be exhausted by this description alone. Its activities covered a vast array of phenomena – insurgency, civil war, resistance against foreign forces, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, genocide, slavery, mass rape of women and children, mass torture – many of these, no less, and some perhaps more, horrific than terrorism; but each distinct from the other. To simply label all its actions 'terrorism' and ignore the very complex dynamic of its activities and motives, as well as the circumstances, and in some measure provocations, that may have fuelled this dynamic, is to falsify reality.

Against the continuing and strident commentary that warns us about the 'rising threat of global terror', it is useful to look at actual trends. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2019, deaths from terrorism fell for the fourth consecutive year in 2018, down 52 per cent from their peak in 2014. The most significant element in this improvement came as a result of military successes against Daesh and Boko Haram, with the total number of deaths falling by 15.2 per cent between 2017 and 2018 to 15,952. The largest fall occurred in Iraq, which recorded 3,217 fewer deaths from terrorism in 2018, a 75 per cent decrease from the previous year. Deaths attributed to Daesh declined 69 per cent, with attacks declining 63 per cent in 2018. IS had an estimated 18,000 fighters left in Iraq and Syria, down from over 70,000 in 2014. Somalia recorded the second largest reduction in deaths for the second year in a row, with 824 fewer deaths recorded than in 2017.[9]

The fall in the total number of deaths from terrorism was mirrored by a reduction in the impact of terrorism around the world, with 98 countries recording an improvement on their GTI score, compared to 40 that recorded deterioration.[10]

Crucially, the number of deaths from terrorism fell for the second successive year in Europe, from over two hundred in 2017 to 62 in 2018. Only two attacks killed five or more people, compared to 11 in 2015, which was the peak year for terrorist activity in the region in the last decade. The total number of terrorist incidents also fell by 40 per cent, to 245 in 2018. Western Europe recorded its lowest number of incidents since 2012, with 183 incidents. The number of countries in Western Europe recording a terrorism-related death in 2018 fell from nine to five.[11] Very significantly, there were no recorded attacks by a known terrorist group in the US through 2018. Out of 57 recorded terrorist events, 28 were committed by far-right extremists, 27 by unknown perpetrators, and two by jihad-inspired extremists.[12]

Indeed, far-right political extremism and terrorism appears to be the greater threat in the West today, and constitutes an increasing danger across the world – with India at significant risk as well. GTI 2019 notes that far-right attacks increased by 320 per cent over 2014-18 in North America, Western Europe, and Oceania. This trend has continued into 2019, with 77 deaths attributed to far-right terrorists till September 2019. The number of arrests linked to right-wing terrorism in Europe in 2019 increased for the third year in a row.[13] In a continuing process of analytic misdirection, however, counter-terrorism research and commentary continues to be dominated by the 'rising' threat of Islamist terror, and by groups such as Daesh and al Qaeda.

It is essential to reiterate, moreover, that most currently dominant international Islamist terrorist formations and movements are substantially a product of acts of commission or omission by the Western powers – principally the US – and their allies. It is useful to remind ourselves that the countries that experienced the greatest upheavals of the past decades as a result of destabilising external interventions, and of the West-backed Arab Spring, also had the largest increases in the impact of terrorism.

Far from addressing the issue through coherent counter-terrorism strategies, it appears that the US (with or without the

support of its traditional allies) continues to use terrorism – and often, just the bogey of terrorism – to justify a range of unilateral actions across the world, most of which have had dubious motives and manifestly destabilising consequences, and have inflicted appalling human costs. Recent US actions against Iran – and particularly the assassination of Maj Gen Qasem Soleimani – suggest that little has been learned from the disastrous adventurism of the past, particularly in Iraq, Syria and Libya, among others, as the American trajectory remains unchanged. The potential for further destabilisation of the vulnerable regions of the world is limitless, and demands that US and Western assessments of the threat of terrorism be examined very closely and critically, to unbundle the endemic conflation of terms, and to separate the real threat of terrorism from other security risks, strategic challenges, and the many 'great games' that are often mixed in, as well as from the range of deceptions that are intentionally used to muddy the waters.

A priority within such an examination is the idea of 'global networks' of terrorism, or specifically, of al Qaeda and Daesh. Both these groups have (quite naturally) sought to project a larger than life image of their power and influence by claiming attacks and affiliations far and wide, often on the most tenuous evidence. It is essential to examine the conditions necessary for conceding credibility of such claims. Networks, affiliations and linkages between terrorist formations or actions exist only where one or more of three factors are found: a clear transfer of command and control; the transfer of measurable resources, manpower or technology; or the augmentations of capacities and capabilities from the parent formation to the 'affiliate'. In an overwhelming proportion of cases where 'affiliation' is claimed, however, none of these factors are in evidence. At peak, a significant number of terrorist groups across continents claimed affiliation to Daesh. What was often seen, however, was simply the buying out of whole sections of al Qaeda, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Taliban, Boko Haram, etc. By and large, these groups were already engaged in terrorist activities in their theatres of operation, and they continued with such activities more or less independently, with little or no augmentation of capacities, movement of cadres or transfer of resources. Essentially, the Daesh label and flag, at this stage, was thought to confer greater legitimacy among a particular target population, and attracted infinitely greater media attention – often providing weak and marginal

local formations the 'oxygen of publicity' they sought. This, however, also had unintended consequences. The revulsion, anger and fear Daesh actions had inspired across the world often meant that state counter-terrorism agencies dedicated disproportionate resources to any formation thought to be connected, however remotely, to IS, resulting in decimation of these groups in many theatres of conflict.

The core of power for a terrorist group and its capacity for indoctrination rests on the propaganda of the deed. Here, al Qaeda and Daesh strategies diverged dramatically. Al Qaeda orchestrated spectacular acts of catastrophic terrorism – among others, the US Embassy bombings; the attack on USS Cole; and the greatest of all, the 9/11 attacks. Daesh could never reach this level of organisational efficacy and relied, instead, on dramatic acts of apparently extraordinary cruelty and destruction,[14] widely advertised through all means of communication. This created an immensely larger than life image of its power, based on an exaggeration of its own cruelty and battlefield victories. Thereafter, its growth was defined by wartime 'successes', particularly the fall of Mosul and its rampage across a vast (largely uninhabited desert) territory. The loss of these territories, the visible string of humiliating defeats, the surrenders of large numbers of cadres, all these have discredited both Daesh and al Qaeda. While occasional acts of spectacular terrorism may keep a trickle of recruitments going, and opportunities for local revival may arise as a result of state collapse, or of great and external power mischief, most 'international' terrorist groups, existing and those that may rise in the foreseeable future, are likely to have a rather short half-life.

The reality is, the Islamists are on the wrong side of history. The essential challenge is to contain the scale of damage they are able to do before their inevitable defeat. Their imminent failure is seeded in an essential incomprehension of the nature of power, which they have reduced to the demonstration of primitive brutalities. Mass executions, enslavement, torture and the ritualistic murders that were televised across the world by Daesh, for instance, may create the illusion of power; may, indeed, establish local dominance, but these have little to do with the contemporary dynamics of national or global power.

Moreover, while the purported Islamist ideology may result in a false unity of purpose, the reality is that the assumed commonalities under this conceptual rubric are deeply misleading. The overwhelming motivation of those who join contemporary militant and terrorist Islamist movements tends to be local or personal, and the adherence to the Islamist flag is essentially a consequence of geography, opportunity and, often, subjective and historical accident. State failure, external state interventions and a power vacuum are often decisive in the rise of various movements of violence, and the adherence to a particular ideology is largely a matter of location and demography. Crucially, only a tiny core of adherents tends to be ideological, and motives for joining terrorist movements are widely varied, often idiosyncratic. This is why perceived victories of a terrorist formation result in a surge of support and recruitment, while a succession of defeats sees the quick falling away of all but a small kernel of 'believers'.

Crucially, enduring power today is based overwhelmingly on a sustainable complex of economic, scientific, technological base and intellectual capacities. Borrowed, gifted, looted or purchased technologies cannot be the basis of lasting power – this is a reality that terrorist formations and, indeed, most aspiring or disruptive states, fail to comprehend. While primitive brutalities can and do feed the illusion of power, they cannot consolidate real power. Terrorist formations lack the capacities to establish a lasting network of institutions and capabilities, as do many of their lesser sponsoring states. The 'great powers' – those who have provided the technical, technological and sometimes financial resources – directly or through other mediating powers – during early phases of a terrorist movement, have quickly found themselves targets of the very movements they saw fit to support, even as the geopolitical goals these were supported for have tended to prove elusive. At this stage, these major powers have deployed overwhelming resources against these 'international' terrorist groupings and the latter have, in the main, experienced rapid disintegration. While exceptions, such as the Taliban and its affiliates in Afghanistan, suggest a different dynamic, this is not a consequence of the tenacity or vitality of such groups but rather of persistent strategic errors in addressing the role of external state players – in this case, Pakistan.

It is significant that many of the traditional state sponsors of Islamist terrorism are gradually, sometimes fitfully, revising their long-term strategies to abandon this tool and withdraw support from various terrorist formations and other sponsoring states. Saudi Arabia[15] and various West Asian states are certainly moderating their support to international terrorist formations,[16] and particularly to Pakistan, the country that has long acted as their cat's paw, though they remain embroiled in proxy sectarian wars within their own region.[17]

Modern trends in terrorism have broadly been seen to follow cyclical patterns,[18] and the Islamist terrorist scourge appears to be past its 'half-life'. Residual risks persist, of course, and significant regions remain afflicted by the remnants of groups that have tormented the world over the past decades. There has, however, been a progressive de-legitimisation of Islamist terrorism among the larger Muslim community, as well as some decline in state support over recent years, and it is not unreasonable to expect that the worst of this 'wave' is already in the past.

The circumstances that have animated past waves of terrorism, however, persist and, indeed, potentially and dramatically worsen, with greater global inequality and inequity, climate change, "technological unemployment"[19] and the crisis of "useless people",[20] the consolidation of conditions of corporate and technological feudalism, and the progressive marginalisation of large proportions of the global population, as well as of regions and states at the poorer end of technological capability. Inevitably, new waves of terrorism will rise under the integument of some new bundle of grievances or ideology. At the same time, there has been a rising tide of irrationality, extremism and inflexion toward authoritarianism in politics, which can only contribute to a further trend towards destabilisation and increasing popular resentment.

New waves of terrorism are, consequently, likely to arise and the coming avatar is potentially even more disruptive than the past, as the terrorists of tomorrow pursue access to weapons of mass destruction. While there has been a great deal of commentary on the possibilities of nuclear terrorism, it is, in fact, bio-terrorism that holds far greater dangers. The Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism thus observed that

the threshold of access is much lower for biological weapons and their "threat is greater than the nuclear".[21]

These dangers are compounded further by the rising potential of cyber-terrorism, as global cyber-integration augments, and smart cities rise, often without adequate protection of their cyber-networked infrastructure, and growing personal and service cyber-dependencies. With an estimated 30.73 billion devices now connected and expected to reach 75.44 billion by 2025[22], the potential for destructive disruption can only be imagined, and will continue to increase exponentially.

These risks are further enlarged as terrorism continues to dovetail into state-backed misadventures in an evolving and deeply destabilising paradigm of "unrestricted warfare", within which "nothing is forbidden" and the distinctions between soldier and civilian vanish.[23] Conventional warfare between states, and particularly among the more powerful and advanced states of the world, is a receding likelihood, as apocalyptic weaponry proliferates. States are, consequently, likely to pursue their perceived geopolitical interests through a widening range of 'operations other than war' – including terrorism – exploiting the growing vulnerabilities of target states in a rapidly transforming world. Predicting these patterns of concealed assault and protecting against them will be the gravest challenge for states, particularly within an environment where leadership remain substantially unaware of the complexities of this new paradigm of warfare.

Endnotes

[1] See, for instance, "The Capture of Mosul: Terror's New Headquarters," *The Economist,* June 14, 2014, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2014/06/14/terrors-new-headquarters.

[2] "A thunderstorm not a drizzle of air power needed against ISIL", ABC Lateline, September 22, 2014, https://www.abc.net.au/lateline/a-thunderstorm-not-a-drizzle-of-airpower-needed/5761934.

[3] Fazal Hawramy, Shalaw Mohammad and Luke Harding, "Inside Islamic State's Oil Empire: how capture oilfields fuel ISIS insurgency," *The Guardian,* November 19, 2014, *The Guardian,* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/19/-sp-islamic-state-oil-empire-iraq-isis.

[4] See, for instance, Kim Willshir, Anne Penketh and Alexandra Topping, **"**Paris welcomes world leaders to solidarity rally against terror attacks," *The Guardian,* January 11, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/11/paris-world-leaders-solidarity-rally-terror-attacks.

[5] See, for instance, Monica Mark, "Boko Haram's 'deadliest massacre', 2,000 feared dead in Nigeria," *The Guardian,* January 10, 2015. The number of fatalities were widely disputed, but the point is that, at the time of the incident, it was believed to have resulted in 2,000 or more dead, and yet found little resonance in the then strident global discourse on 'Islamic terrorism'.

[6] See, for instance, Richard Sindelar, "ISIS 3.0: The More Virulent Threat," Lobe Log, April 4, 2019, https://lobelog.com/isis-3-0-the-more-virulent-threat/

[7] Seth G. Jones, et. al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State,* Rand Corporation, 2017, p. 273, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html.

[8] I borrow K.P.S. Gill's description of the defeated Khalistanis from "Endgame in Punjab – 1988-1993", *Faultlines: Writings in Conflict & Resolution,* Volume 1, May 1999, p. 69.

[9] Global Terrorism Index 2019, Institute for Economics & Peace, November 2019, http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] The executions, rapes and tortures that Daesh relied on were not, in fact, all that 'extraordinary'. Most terrorist and insurgent groups have engaged in similar brutalities. The distinguishing mark of Daesh's use of its atrocities was their transformation into spectacle, captured on video and disseminated through sophisticated social media channels.

[15] Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Is Saudi Arabia's Counterterrorism Approach Shifting?", Policywatch 2913, Policy Analysis, The Washington Institute, January 9, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-saudi-arabias counterterrorism-approach-shifting.

[16] Bethan McKernan, "More than 40 Islamic countries just met and vowed to wipe terrorism off the map", Independent, 27 November 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/islamic-countries-

terrorism-destroy-isis-muslim-riyadh-saudi-arabia-iran-egypt-syria-lebanon-a8077986.html.

[17] Jonathan Marcus, "Why Saudi Arabia and Iran are bitter rivals", BBC News, September 16, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809.

[18] David Rapaport suggests a 40-year cycle for each 'wave' of 'modern terrorism', with the current 'wave' impelled by 'religious terrorism' commencing in the 1980s. See, David C. Rapaport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," in A. Cronin and J. Ludes (ed), *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy,* Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, pp. 46-73.

[19] John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren", Essays in Persuasion, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932, pp. 358-373. Also at
https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/upload/Intro_and_Section_I.pdf.

[20] Karl Marx observed, "The production of too many useful things results in too many useless people." Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, 1844, Third Manuscript, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Economic_and_Philosophical_Mauscripts.pdf. See also, Yuval Noah Harari, "The rise of the useless class", ideas.ted.com, February 24, 2017, https://ideas.ted.com/the-rise-of-the-useless-class/.

[21] Graham and Talent, et. al., *World at Risk,* New York, Vintage Books, 2008, p.11.

[22] "Internet of Things - number of connected devices worldwide from 2015 to 2025 (in billions), 2015-2025", *Statista Research Department,* November 14, 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/471264/iot-number-of-connected-devices-worldwide/.

[23] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare,* Beijing, Natraj Publishers, New Delhi, 2007.

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