

The Powerful are Powerless

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If we want to end terrorism the global community should agree on a common definition that is just. This is an onerous task because as of now different factions in the world community are hell bent on branding each other as terrorists. The Americans and the British brand the Al-Qaeda and Taliban as terrorists but the sympathizers of these Muslim groups label the Americans and British as terrorists. When there is no global consensus on the definition of terrorism it is not possible to have any global movement to stamp out terrorism.

Even a superpower such as the United States is powerless in this regard. As Noam Chomsky points out the use of brute force cannot be used to silence terrorists. It is not possible even for the Americans to convert their country into an impregnable fortress that terrorists cannot penetrate. It is necessary therefore to objectively define terrorism, identify the root causes of terrorism so defined, and work out an agenda for action that does away with these root causes.

The academic and research community has a big role in this regard. There are many reasons why this is the case. First, it is global to the extent that it is adequately represented by most countries in the world. Second, it is reasonably tightly knit and the members are connected well with each other. Third, it is capable, by definition, of detailed and rigorous study of the matter. Once the academic community has come to a consensus the individual members can establish support for the definition in their individual countries. The process of establishing support would also coincide with the process of getting feedback. It is quite possible and also desirable that the feedback received translates into modifications in the definition.

A suggested definition of terrorism is the use of violence for political purposes. However, this definition is too broad and unsatisfactory (look at *Encyclopedia of Terrorism*). The *Encyclopedia* suggests narrowing down the definition to “peace time equivalents of war crimes.” One war crime is killing innocent non-violent civilians not involved in combat. However, a tactic, which has often been used by the U.S. to combat terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan is the bombing of their cities and strategic locations. A large number of civilian casualties have been reported as a result of these attacks. According to the given definition the U.S. government would qualify as a terrorist organisation¹ but it would contend that air attacks were the only efficient methods (which economized on loss of American lives in an unfamiliar terrain and country) left to tackle terrorists.

¹ Note it can be claimed that it is the American attack, which converted the conflict between the struggling nations into a war. Thus, one can argue that the American attack was something, which disrupted “peace” and therefore could be thought of as a peacetime equivalent of a war crime. By the cited definition of terrorism therefore the bombing can possibly be thought of as a terrorist act.

However, it seems to me that the above definition suggested by the *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* is a good starting point and subsequent fine-tuning can be done so as to bring about the desired consensus.

What we can do in the rest of the paper is to assume this starting point as the appropriate definition. Chomsky says that a good way to stop terrorism is to stop participating in it. For example, if the American government undertakes air attacks on civilian locations in response to attacks by Muslim terrorists it would itself be classified as a terrorist outfit under the above definition. The terror struck by America would then lead to retaliatory terrorist attacks by Muslim terrorists. Thus, the spectre of terrorism hanging over the world would become more potent instead of weakening. To that extent Chomsky is right. But what if the U.S did not retaliate? Will not more attacks by Muslim terrorists follow? Chomsky is right to the extent that violent means are not the right means to quell terrorism. But neither is inaction. It is necessary to dwell on the root causes of terrorism and eliminate these through dialogue and policy.

The main reason for terrorism is the imbalance of power. This imbalance exists among countries, classes, races and colours. The imbalance could exist in terms of economic power or military might. It is also unfortunate that the imbalance of power often coincides with the racial, colour, or class divide. And even more unfortunately it contributes to feelings of superiority among certain classes and races in the world. The feeling of superiority makes them strive to maintain this imbalance of power as if their superior position is a birth right.

Examples of an imbalance of power are those between the plain folk and the hill people in India, that between the upper and lower castes in the same country, the black and white people in South Africa and earlier in America.

Terrorism in its modern form was seen in the anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa. Such terrorism owed its genesis to economic or political dominance by the rulers though nowadays people seem to be of the opinion that the causes of terrorism are basically political and not economic. To my mind this is far from the truth. In pre-independence India the basic cause of terrorism was indeed the unheeded demand for *swaraj* or self – governance. However, in Kenya the dreaded Mau Mau terrorism was caused by problems of land ownership among the Kikuyu - an example which demonstrates the powerful nature of economic causes. The Middle East which has been responsible for much of the recent rise in global terrorism has seen an increase in unemployment and stagnation or decline in incomes. An extreme case is Saudi Arabia. In 2001 the unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia was a mind boggling 15% and per capita income had fallen from \$28,000 (around Rs 12.6 lakhs) in the eighties to \$ 8000 (Rs 3.6 lakhs) around 2000 (see Pope et al, 2001 and Reed, 2001). The New York Times quoted the following statement by one Middle East expert after the September 11 tragedy:

Angry young men, many of them unemployed have seized the public arena from Algeria to South Asia and filled it with hate, intolerance and the abuse of women (Sanger, 2001)

According to Noam Chomsky the military, foreign and economic policy of the United States towards the middle-east has been aimed at gaining control of the energy resources of the middle-east, a fact that has not gone down well with the natives. This has led to animosity towards the United States and the consequent spread of terrorism.

The economic balance today is seen in terms of rising economic inequality both within and among nations. That this can lead to terrorism is captured by Willy Brandt's apt quote, "While hunger rules peace cannot prevail." Around 50 years ago the disparity in per capita income between the richest and poorest country in the world was 1 to 20. Today it is 1 to 300. No wonder international jealousies, which can spawn terrorism have risen. Within the United States, in 1949 the top one percent of the population had control over 21 percent of the national wealth. Today, the top one percent owns as much as 42 percent of the wealth. (For a detailed discussion of the material in this paragraph, see Azam, 2001)

Increasing poverty can be another cause of terrorism. Between 1995 and 2001 the number of poor people in the world increased by 20% from 1 billion to 1.2 billion. This is certainly more than the percentage increase in world population indicating that the proportion of the world's population that is poor is increasing.

The channels through which this increasing inequality and poverty have been generated are far from honourable. Globalization has actually turned out to be a euphemism for economic imperialism. Foreign private investment actually helps multinationals to get control of developing economies. Aid is geared to make developing countries purchase the products of the developed world, thus stifling domestic industry.

There are real life examples, which show that aid can make recipient economies worse off. Britain, for example, is giving 452 million pounds to the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh (see Monbiot, 2003 for details) through DFID. This is 15 times what it spent last year on the famine in Ethiopia. In the name of reforming and structuring the economy the DFID has goaded the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh to take measures which have hurt the poor immensely. One of these is the dispossession of 20 million people from the land. In Zambia the DFID is spending just 0.7 million pounds on improving nutrition and 80 times the amount on privatising the copper mines. While the latter might improve the efficiency of mines and their income generating capacity there are sure to be adverse effects in terms of employment generation and increase in poverty. These will surely overwhelm the minute positive effect on poverty alleviation that the first mentioned packet of aid might have. Through trade and economic negotiations developed countries have forced developing countries to reduce tariffs in areas in which developed countries have a comparative advantage but have not done the same in areas where the latter have a comparative advantage. Thus, while markets have expanded for producers of the first world they have not done so for producers of the third world.

What emerges from this discussion is that economic domination of one country or community by another can be a major cause of terrorism. And though such domination might be economically rational from the point of view of the dominating community, it might not be rational in social welfare terms for the dominant community to continue with such economic domination. Instead a policy of "sharing and caring" might be

optimal from the point of view of social welfare and even global welfare. Political thinkers have attached too much importance to counter-terrorism in the form of violence. However, such counter-terrorism is not able to remove the seeds of terrorism, which have already been sown in society but is only able to stifle these temporarily.

To start with it is necessary to initiate a process of dialogue with the terrorists. Quite often it is seen that the terrorists make outrageous demands and the violence continues. In such cases violent counter-terrorism is necessary. However, in this case it is necessary to ensure that terrorist attacks are targeted specifically towards the terrorist group and that there is no loss of life and property among the civilian population. In case the latter condition is not met it is quite possible that the affected civilian population is aroused, thus broadening the base of the terrorist group.

Conclusion

It is necessary to have a universally acceptable definition of terrorism in order to have a concerted global bid to stamp it out. The definition of terrorism as “peacetime equivalents of war crimes” is a good starting point. The use of academicians to arrive at a suitable definition of terrorism is recommended because of the neutral nature of many academicians and the existence of a close knit global community among academicians.

The causes of terrorism are not just political but also economic. Therefore, it is necessary for economically powerful nations not to indulge in economically exploitative relationships (which in its strongest form are called economic imperialism) even if it is economically rational in the short run to do so. A relationship of sharing and caring among developed and developing nations needs to be nurtured. It is necessary also to break racial, class and religious divides.

Quite often dialogue breaks down and violence does not abate. The last resort in that case is military counter-terrorist action. Even in this case it is essential that the counter-terrorist action is specifically targeted towards the terrorist group and does not affect the life and property of the civilians. If the latter condition is violated it is quite possible that the terrorist movement will attract a lot of sympathy from civilians and thus become even more broad-based.

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