

Justifications for Terrorism:
An Analysis of the Justifications Behind Terrorism

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Since American President George W. Bush declared a “war on terror” in late 2001, the concept of terrorism has been given unprecedented predominance in academic and political spheres. In what is reflective of the concept’s vast implications, topics as fundamental as the definition of terrorism and controversial as the justifications for terrorist activity have dominated both public and private discourse. Although an understanding of the most basic definitions of terrorism is vital for discussion, an evaluation of the justifications most commonly offered for terrorism is equally as integral to understanding the thought processes behind terrorist activity. Furthermore, an analysis of terrorism can be remarkably revealing to the validity of the causes terrorism claims to achieve, and also highlights alternate routes to terrorism that can be used as vehicles for change by the oppressed. Moreover, despite an adamant government refusal to capitulate to terrorist demands, terrorist’s ability to raise public awareness to their cause, further enhanced by a globalized media, is a tactical measure of achievement that must be considered when evaluating the effectiveness, if any, of terrorism. Ultimately, the urgency for an academic examination of terrorism eclipses any concomitant controversy and necessitates an exploration of the foundation and motives fueling the deadly behavior that threatens to define a generation held hostage by public fear and confusion.

Because of the frenzied attention terrorism has received in a post 9/11 world, it is imperative to clearly define terrorism before properly evaluating the justifications for terrorist activity. Due to the plethora of incongruent definitions of terrorism, academics generally agree that it is best to provide a broad definition to encompass terrorist activity. A Spanish academic on terrorism, Fernando Reinares’ definition has received laud due to its generosity in allocation yet precise description of one of the most significant effects of terrorism: the ability to frighten a vast population with the random killings of a few. In his book, Terrorism and Anti-terrorism, Reinares describes this numeric inconsistency accordingly:

When a violent action generates psychological effects disproportionate to its material consequences it has the quality of an act of terrorism. Concretely it has the intention of generating emotional reactions like anxiety, uncertainty or fear

amongst a population (Reinares 1998, p. 15).

Although comprehensive, Reinares' definition can be further built upon by the addition of the thoughts of the renowned American academic Michael Walzer, who confirms Reinares' argument in his latest book, Arguing About War. In its text, Walzer says the following about terrorism:

(Terrorism) is the deliberate killing of innocent people, at random, in order to spread fear through a whole population and force the hand of its political leaders (Walzer 2004, p. 130).

Along with solidifying Reinares' argument, Walzer also provides an imperative categorization of terrorism. Specifically, Walzer (2004) distinguishes between terrorism used by authoritarian and totalitarian governments against their own citizens as a means of spreading fear and discouraging political opposition as state terrorism. Equally so, Walzer also provides a separate category for war terrorism, which occurs when governments intentionally kill mass numbers of civilians in order to force an opposing government to capitulate. Furthermore, as Wilkinson (1997) notes, while state terrorism tends to be internalized within a state, the latter form of terrorism is typically viewed as externalized and as a conflict between two or more governments. Now that a reasonably accepted definition and categorization of terrorism has been established, it is logical to proceed to an introduction of the justifications offered for terrorism.

Speaking in general, Walzer (2004) states that those who excuse terrorists most commonly do so under the pretense that the government inaccurately labels all struggles of national liberation and/or revolution as terrorist activity to dismantle and discredit the oppressed and legitimize the often extreme reaction of the government to such activity. It is from this central thought that Walzer expands upon to tackle the specific make up of what most academics accept as the four main excuses for terrorism.

As history shows, many national minority groups situated in developed countries claim that any terrorist activity produced by the oppressed is a justifiable reciprocation of the treatment the oppressed have been

exposed to and endured at the hands of the government. Rolston (ed. George, 1991) advances that this mentality was locally displayed in Northern Ireland through the workings of the Provisional IRA during the mid to late twentieth century, as displayed by the classification of their own terrorist activities as a response to British and Unionist paramilitaries. Specific examples aside, the adage 'an eye for an eye,' is applicable in this context, and perhaps the most concise manner to summarize the justification that defines terrorism as a reaction to a state's repressive behavior.

In this scenario, it is obvious to derive that the oppressed view the state or government of the day as the enemy. It seems equally obvious that by the oppressed mirroring the government in its violent and destructive patterns, they are merely perpetuating the vicious progression of bloodshed. Furthermore, just as terrorists claim that the government's reactions to terrorism will illustrate the state's barbaric tendencies, it is imperative to assume that the government can claim the actions taken by the terrorist groups are just as inflammatory of the oppressed. Although the possibility of role reversals must be taken into consideration when exploring this particular justification, perhaps the most damning critique is the most obvious: that terrorism, whether enacted by the state, individual, or oppressed, nonetheless creates the depreciation of civilization and humanity, ultimately generating the political superiority of one group over that of another. Ergo, as Dershowitz (2002) impresses, by legitimizing their actions as reciprocation for state terrorism, group terrorists are merely joining the ranks of their enemy by enforcing subordination through fear and intimidation.

The second justification for terrorism that Walzer (2004) identifies is that terrorist activity is a last resort that a desperate people must employ when given no other alternatives. Although seemingly simple in theory, this justification is widely used and often misconstrued by terrorist groups as a means to gain sympathy from the public. In fact, as Walzer (2004) readily asserts, terrorists almost always utilize violent means as a first resort, as evidenced by the IRA's 1971 offensive attacks despite reform and the development of the nationalist party, the SDLP. Most recently, the IRA's self-declared stance of

employing terrorist tactics as a last resort has been further discredited by the much contested 2004 conviction of 3 IRA members accused of supplying Marxist rebels with urban terrorism training in Bogota, Columbia. Surely, the provision of education to potential terrorists challenges the IRA's claims of their forced utilization of terrorism, and instead could suggest a desire to maintain, if not perpetuate, terrorist know-how. Furthermore, as Falk (ed. George, 1991) proposes, the tendency to pursue violence above other peaceful alternatives was also evidenced in America during the mid-nineties, which has been documented as when the al-Qaeda network was in the midst of plotting the second attack on the World Trade Center despite President William Jefferson Clinton's ongoing efforts to reconcile the Middle East's and G8 groups concerns with globalization.

This usage of violence as a first resort is particularly condemnable in liberal democracies, where pressure groups and lobbyists alike offer a wealth of options. Although those who justify terrorism as a last resort may scoff at the bureaucracy of pursuing diplomatic alternatives as ineffective, that argument can be quickly countered by referencing the American civil rights movement forwarded by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the 1960's. Despite pressure to pursue violent alternatives in the face of institutionalized aggression, Dr. King pledged himself to civil disobedience, ultimately gaining national attention and advancing his cause of civil rights to fruition. Although Dr. King could have easily cited the brutal treatment of civil demonstrators by state sponsored armed forces as justification for a retaliation of protestor-driven violence, he instead navigated alternate, legal, and democratic means and, in the process, delegitimized the claim that terrorist activity is a last resort. Furthermore, it can be postulated that, given modern day hypersensitive media conditions, terrorist's desire to generate publicity through the media, rather than create resolution through political channels, drives them to opt for terrorism as the first mode of operation.

As Walzer (2004) notes, a mildly more substantial justification concludes that no other strategy is possible due to the weakness of the oppressed group and the overriding power of the state. As

Dershowitz (2002) further stresses, this mentality was supported by minority nationalist groups in industrialized areas such as Italy, West Germany, and Spain in the late twentieth century. Specifically, these groups claimed that terrorism was a means of achieving success despite the cause's lack of public support, a dearth which the terrorist's interpret as characteristic of a domineering government. Another subset of this justification moves even further to claim that the government's extreme reactions against terrorist activity helps to illustrate the government's own leviathan status and will consequently create a civilian backlash to the state. Specifically, government reactions to terrorism can result in infringements of individual civil liberties for the promotion of enhanced national security, as was the case in late 2001 with the introduction of the Patriot Acts I and II by the United States government in response to the 9/11 tragedies. Although the notable variations stemming from different subsets of this larger justification have been presented, what is most imperative about this justification is that it legitimizes the use of terrorism as a means of compensating for the weakness of the oppressed group.

However, as Guelke (1998) clearly outlines, this justification's biggest flaw is vastly internal. Meaning, the weakness of public support terrorist activity receives is reflective of the masses disagreement with the terrorist cause in question. Literally speaking, it is therefore logical to conclude that terrorist groups represent the interest of a select few, or minority. As Heywood (2002) contends, Vladimir Lenin's belief that terrorism is ultimately elitist and consequently doomed to fail supports the dismantling of this justification. In addition, much like the justification that claims terrorism is a last resort, the potential for communication through political channels is also condemning to the justification that the state is too powerful to infiltrate through any means besides terrorism.

Coyly building upon the earlier justification regarding the minority stance of terrorist groups, the fourth and final excuse for terrorism as determined by Walzer (2004) is perhaps the most simple: that terrorism works and ultimately frees the oppressed even without their direct involvement. Although obviously an

oversimplification of the facts, this excuse is commonly propagated, but easily defeated through proper application.

Although it is easy to claim that terrorism works, one must be able to produce historical evidence of the effectiveness of sole terrorist activity before justifying the statement. Indeed, such a task is laborious and ultimately impossible. However, it is imperative here to distinguish between guerilla warfare, which was successfully waged against the U.S Marines by the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War, and terrorism. As Heywood (2002) clarifies, the former is a conflict confined between guerillas and armed forces of the opposition with the guerilla objective of the liberation of occupied territory. This is in vast contrast with the latter, which is based on indiscriminate violence and propaganda aimed at vast negative psychological effects. Therefore, although it would be tempting for advocates of this justification to claim Vietnam as evidence that terrorism works, it would be a categorically incorrect statement. However, referring to Northern Irish history indicates that it is no coincidence that the IRA declared a ceasefire to allow the development of the political arm of the IRA, Sinn Fein, after twenty-five years of fruitless terrorist violence. This pattern of ineffective terrorist activity is also illustrated in the Middle East, where the last four decades have been dominated by inter-Palestinian and Israel terrorism with either group achieving little permanent progress.

Just as it is wrong to accept justifications offered for terrorism, it is equally inaccurate to deny terrorist's ability to raise the profile of a local struggle to the global eye. Despite an adamant transnational government denial of terrorist demands, the mass carnage terrorism produces translates into worldwide coverage by an increasingly accessible broadcast and print media. Furthermore, the public awareness media venues produce create an influential electorate sentiment that can transform into a powerful informal policy shaper.

The horrific Madrid bombings of March 2004, which occurred immediately before the Spanish general election and left more than 200 dead and an entire population traumatized, had dramatically direct political ramifications. Without question, the ruling Partido Popular Jose Maria Aznar suffered immediate defeat on the tailing elections at the hands of enraged voters directly linking the presence of Spanish troops in Iraq as the motivation behind the attacks. In addition to the outing of an established leader, the Madrid bombing continued to show its influence as the new Prime Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero of the Socialist Worker's Party, immediately withdrew the contingent 1,300 Spanish troops from Iraq in what was widely interpreted as an effort to appease a fearful electorate and prevent future terrorist attacks.

It is uncontestable that the Islamic militants accredited with the Madrid attacks employed a frighteningly degree of deliberation in staging attacks prior to elections in a country directly allied with the Second Iraq War. Perhaps the only aspect of the Madrid bombing more disconcerting than the sheer body count and strategizing is the ploy's effectiveness, as the bombings unhinged a Conservative Popular Party leader and replaced him with a Socialist who ordered the withdraw of forces supporting the American-waged war on terror. Although an understandably undesirable admission, the Madrid bombings not only illustrate the ability of terrorists to elevate the profile of a cause, but also serve as evidence to the influence terrorism can wield on the vehicle of public opinion.

As Walzer has made evident, there are four main justifications that terrorists and apologists for terrorists offer to legitimize the indiscriminate violence of their actions. Although each justification provides an explanation unique to a particular excuse, a common thread that is easily distinguishable within all four justifications is that terrorists blame oppression for terrorism. However, as the above evaluation of each offered justification proves, oppression does not automatically equate to terrorism. In fact, as Walzer (2004) concludes, the only real cause of terrorism is the decision of a minority group to facilitate terrorist activity. Particularly in liberal democratic societies, such as Northern Ireland and America, where

terrorism has been so unfortunately pervasive, there are simply too many political channels and pressure groups that provide the oppressed with democratic and peaceful alternatives to ever legitimize the fundamental disregard for human life that embodies all acts of terrorism. However, it is essential to the understanding of terrorism that terrorist's ability to act as an instrument of public awareness not be dismissed. Despite terrorist's refusal to pursue formal public policy channels, terrorism draws on emotions and fears to disrupt lifestyles and alter both institutional and personal prioritizations.

The largely American-driven focus terrorism has received as a concept, controversy and battle since the atrocities of 9/11 is irrefutable. Equally so, the backwards and unconscionable actions of terrorist networks have been the subject of undeniable and unifying scrutiny. Perhaps most resonant, however, is the rejection of proposed justifications for terrorism in a globalized world with growing policy avenues and civilian awareness. Despite natural human reactions of repulsion to the atrocities of terrorism, an examination of terrorism must continue to enforce that it is not the state, nor desperation, nor repression or effectiveness that produces terrorism; rather, it is terrorists' hypocrisy and refusal to compromise or consider peaceful tactics that perpetuates the ultimately universally damning cycle of terrorism.

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