

Terrorism – Does it Work?

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Recent weeks have seen the re-emergence (if it ever went away) of political terrorism in both Israel and Pakistan, with high-profile attacks on politically sensitive targets in both countries.

It may well be seen, in a hundred year time, that the first period of this century will come to be known as 'The Age of Terror', and certainly 'The War on Terror' will be one of the phrases that will be remembered about this period when everything else will be forgotten.

But one of the questions that is often noticeable by its absence is the simple one of 'What is terror designed to achieve, and does it have an effect'?

The first characteristic of 'terror' is that it is one of the basic tools of 'asymmetric warfare', ie when a weak force tries to take on a powerful one. If it is true that history is written by the winners, then the definition of terrorism is often written by the powerful. One argument has it that the suicide bomber is purely the poor man's weapon delivery system, and in fact there is very little military difference between a bomb attached to a pack on someone's back and a rocket fired from a helicopter gunship. Whilst one is seen as 'legitimate' military tactics, the other is seen not only as 'illegitimate', but also immoral and in fact putting the perpetrators outside the possibility of negotiations. As President Bush's press spokesman said in January 2006, 'We don't negotiate with terrorists, we defeat them'.

The root objective of terrorism has always been to effect another government's policies, and in doing so to gain benefit for the 'terrorist' side. Whether in Algeria in the 1950's, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in the 1980's, the IRA for thirty years against the UK government or the ETA attacks in Spain, terrorism is the ultimate confrontation between the power-poor and the power-rich.

So, does it work? On one level, the answer has to be 'no', in that if the objective of terrorism is to create terror, and therefore to prevent a country from operating in a normal manner, even in the height of the IRA attacks in England (with over forty attacks taking place in London alone in the twelve months leading up to the Bishopsgate bombing of April 1993), or the PLO attacks in Israel, with high-profile suicide bombers causing scores of death, people still went to restaurants, disco's, wedding parties and rode on the buses and trains, and in no instance (outside of America in the immediate aftermath of 9/11)

could it be said that a country or population significantly altered their behaviour as a direct result of terrorist activity.

On the other hand, on a more strategic level, terrorism could be stated to have had considerable success. And that is in the sense that *the purpose of terrorism is to create a response from the target government as though they are under serious attack*. Thus, by responding to a small explosion on a bus, or in a restaurant with dis-proportionately repressive responses, by targeting specific sectors of the population in such a way as to raise the likelihood of radicalisation amongst a significant portion of that group, by creating in the mind of the population the feeling that there is a level of danger that is in fact much greater than the reality threatened by the 'terrorist' group, then the government itself will set in motion a feed-back loop that will start from a small attack, and then continue along a path of over-aggressive response, radicalisation, increased targeting and repression, more low-level disaffection with the government and increased identification with the anti-government groups by people who other wise would not have aligned themselves with either their aims or their tactics. This in turn leads to the identification by the authorities of non-radical groups from the same local population as being of the same danger....and so from one small attack or series of attacks an almost inevitable process of alienation, polarisation and radicalisation takes place.

This leads to a success for the terrorist group that they would never have been able to achieve on their own – as many leading commentators have phrased it, the US invasion of Iraq was AQ's greatest recruiting coup, and turned what was a relatively minor group on the international terrorist scene into a global player able to influence governments across the world.

There has recently been a move away from the rhetoric of terror to one of sustainable security through effective policing and monitoring of potential threats, and there is even talk in the UK of negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan. If there is one thing that history teaches us, it is that today's implacable enemy may well be tomorrow's strategic ally (as has already been seen with the Taliban since the days of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan), and if even Libya's Colonel Ghadaffi can be brought back into the fold, then the possibility remains open for every other terrorist group as well.

