

ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE

Visiting Parliamentary Fellows Seminar

Hilary term, 2006

Terrorism: Roots and Responses

In Hilary Term of 2006, the Visiting Parliamentary Fellows Seminar considered the phenomenon of terrorism. The seminar series took place over eight consecutive weeks and covered a range of topics on the roots of terrorism and possible responses to it.

In early sessions, seminar participants turned their attention to some of the major claims and debates about the causes of terrorism. First among these was the contention that poverty causes terrorism. While acknowledging that terrorist violence was more prevalent in many poorer countries and that many grassroots members of terrorist organizations were from poorer families, participants generally rejected a direct causal link from poverty to terrorism. They did so for several reasons. First, such a claim lends itself to the automatic perception of terrorists as individually victimized by economic circumstance, while in fact the available empirical evidence does not suggest that this is the case. Second, it suggests a specific instrumentalist view of terrorism, when in fact there is little evidence that terrorists choose to commit terrorism as a tool for ending poverty. Third, it could suggest that terrorism is conducted for mercenary advantage or benefit; seminar participants expressed scepticism that this was the actual motivation.

Participants did note a correlation regarding the higher prevalence of terrorism in poorer and more poorly educated societies (rather than individuals), but offered several mitigating comments on this linkage, including the fact that when civil liberties are accounted for, the correlation becomes less clear. Several participants noted that causation could in fact be reversed; conflict, including terrorism, might cause poverty. In response to a question, one of the panelists observed that the provision of social services by Hamas did not necessarily mean that the lack of social services was a cause of Hamas' violence in the first place, though it might have left more room within society for the movement to gain support.

Seminar participants discussed the various linkages being made between campaigns against poverty and terrorism, for instance in the declaration by world leaders at the 2002 World Development Summit in Mexico that the fight against poverty was inextricably linked to the fight against terrorism, or in the UK Department of Foreign and International Development's (DFID's) stated position that poverty exacerbates risk factors which cause terrorism. Participants found these statements problematic for several reasons. First, they were likely to skew existing aid budgets toward terrorism with little evidence that the changes are consequential. Second, they would lead to a neglect of other causes of terrorism, and would therefore be misleading.

The seminar series also addressed the question of whether religious fundamentalism breeds terrorism. Speakers generally rejected this assertion as overly simplistic and unhelpful, with several individuals noting that historically, terrorist movements have been inspired by secular nationalism as much as religion and that, contrary to public perceptions, by no means all

terrorism had Islamic or other religious connections. Beyond that, views of participants on this topic were generally more fractured and diverse than on the question of the role of poverty. Objecting to the current characterization of terrorism as motivated by a desire to overthrow non-Sharia governments, one participant argued that terrorism follows directly from political and anti-occupation causes. She cited the state-sponsored terrorism being conducted by Blair and Bush, along with India, Israel, and Russia and the double standard it applied toward civilians, who were considered sacrosanct in one case but “collateral damage” in the other. Also supporting the political context argument, but in a different form, was a comment made in an earlier session by a panelist who suggested that Islamic fundamentalism was not just anti-Western but was in fact a self-determination project for which the Caliphate represented a coherent long-term proposal.

Other speakers approached the question differently. One suggested that teleological terrorism, toward which most terrorist groups evolved, arose from resentment based on a feeling of comparative inadequacy; it led to a repudiation of the modern world, a rejection of its higher authorities, and therefore, a denial of the possibility of a political solution. A third panelist concurred with the view that terrorism was a refusal to participate in a specific political context, but that the political context did not automatically lead to the selection of terrorism as a method. Noting the need to differentiate the subset of religious people who chose to use force from the great majority who did not, he suggested that the choice of violence, rather than participation, had to be justified by an ideology or a charismatic leader to whom participants had surrendered judgment on questions of morality. This was fanaticism. Although religion could be one type of fanaticism which was manifested in terrorism, it did not follow that religion caused terrorism; it was attributable to a range of fanatical beliefs, both non-religious and religious.

As well as considering the roots of terrorism, seminar participants addressed the question of whether terrorism could succeed at a tactical and strategic level. Executing an attack would qualify as a tactical success, the achievement of political change along the lines favored by the terrorists would amount to a strategic one. One panelist noted that in addition to concrete policy change, terrorists sought to generate fear in the target population. While participants thought that terrorism could succeed, they differed somewhat on the historical record here. One panelist noted the following characteristics seemed to be associated with relative success – or at least the endurance – of terrorist groups: widespread popular perceptions that the terrorists were acting on behalf of a “just cause”; worldwide press coverage; self-justification based on religious beliefs; and transnational support.

Historical patterns pointed to ways in which we might address terrorism today. Many participants noted that political engagement could shift the terms of the conflict at the strategic level. One stressed the need to address legitimate causes while isolating and reducing the scope of illegitimate, irrational ones; he drew a sharp distinction between terrorism prompted by religious fanaticism, where there was less room to counter the intensity of conviction that motivated violence, and secular terrorism occurring in the context of civil war. Another panelist suggested that political engagement and more effective policies, including the presentation of such policies, might drive a wedge between hard-liners and their moderate supporters. Several participants agreed that democracy played an important role in this regard. Calling terrorism “the antithesis of liberal democracy” one participant suggested that terrorism flourished most in undemocratic states. He argued that successful counter-terrorism required legislation, intelligence, diplomacy, armed force, and fair judicial processes, but also had to draw on the

democratic beliefs and rule of law of the target society. Another noted that support for democracy could not be qualified when this became politically inconvenient, and that a long-term solution to the problem of failed states had to be developed. Finally, panelists noted that in order successfully to deliver these messages, policy had to be informed by a thorough understanding of the culture and the countries concerned; academic regional specialists were uniquely qualified to make a contribution here.

Panelists then considered the specific question of whether a “war against terrorism” could be won. In order to come to grips with this issue, it was necessary to understand changes in the nature of war. One participant suggested that the primary change was a trend toward low-intensity conflict, including counter-insurgency and peace-keeping/peace support operations. Another suggested more specific changes with regard to terrorism, including suicide terrorism, the dispersed or decentralized nature of terrorist organizations, and the increasing limitations on the tactics allowed in response. Participants generally concurred that because terrorism became endemic, it would not come to a quick or easy end, nor would it be defeated solely by military means. Rather than winning a “war on terrorism,” they suggested, we had to think of a long-term war of resistance, and devise ways to reduce, limit, and contain the phenomenon. To do so, we needed to re-examine our doctrine, training, and equipment, and make sure that government policy was well-coordinated in pursuit of clearly defined objectives.

Participants also addressed specific measures that might end terrorism. One panelist listed six ways that past campaigns had ended, including: 1) terrorists “shooting themselves in the foot”; 2) the realization by terrorists that anticipated gains were not materializing; 3) loss of supporters; 4) amelioration of the conditions which prompted terrorism; 5) an opening up of political involvement through as multiparty elections and minority representation; and 6) shared awareness of stalemate. None of these were sudden “ends” to the conflict, and participants were particularly critical of the US neglect of history in understanding that particular feature of past terrorist conflicts. Participants characterized the US as generally subscribing to a belief in the “clash of civilizations,” as failing to understand wars of empire and as considering America’s place in the world historically unique.¹ Participants agreed that all needed to examine historical lessons in order to confront current challenges.

Having considered the prospects of success for both terrorist and counterterrorist efforts, the seminar series turned to specific tools and techniques to combat terrorism. Over three sessions, participants discussed the utility and place of discussion, intelligence, and civil rights. In the first session, the discussion was framed by the question, “Should we talk to terrorists?” All of the panelists drew heavily on the British experience in Northern Ireland to suggest various ways in which it might offer transferable lessons. At the same time they acknowledged that one could generalize only to a limited extent on the basis of this particular conflict as there were significant differences between groups such as al-Qaeda and the IRA. However, participants generally agreed on the need for dialogue, and argued that it was most likely to take place when the two sides had reached a stalemate. They noted the potential for actors other than the state, including churches and NGO’s, to serve as facilitators, especially given the back-channel nature of much early communication. Once dialogue had begun, several conditions were typically observed, including a rejection of negotiation under duress. Participants argued that governments could not immediately expect a total renunciation of violence, but that terrorists had to renounce

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violence prior to any final-stage talks. In addressing the gradual evolution of the conversation, it was important to get all sides working together on a daily basis. There were two further ingredients necessary to move the process forward: the belief in a peace dividend, and strong, charismatic leadership.

The seminar considered the role intelligence could play in “beating terrorism.” They all agreed that intelligence was a “necessary but not sufficient” tool. Discussion focused on the role of intelligence in combating contemporary – Jihadist, as one panelist put it – terrorism, although panelists also referred to a broader range of historical cases. One participant listed three emerging characteristics of contemporary intelligence: 1) a growing push for pre-emptive intelligence which located threats and targets before they compromised the life of the community, 2) international cooperation and increasing coordination between domestic and international counter-terrorism efforts, and 3) a growing emphasis on alternative intelligence methods, particularly as terrorists become adept at counter-intelligence. Panelists highlighted the crucial role of perceptions and public support in combating terrorism, and suggested that intelligence could be particularly useful in revealing the nuances of this aspect.

There was general recognition of the difficulty of assessing the performance of intelligence in a public forum, though some participants saw this as intrinsic to the nature of intelligence work and others as emblematic of a harmful culture of secrecy. Other ethical dilemmas presented by the evolving role of intelligence in counter-terrorism included those posed by an increase in covert action; the tension between training effective security services in weak states and the possibility for those services to engage in repression; questions about intelligence and the possible erosion of law; and ethical ways of improving both human and technical intelligence collection. With an eye to the future, participants suggested a series of measures that could bolster the capability and credibility of intelligence in combating terrorism. On the capabilities side, panelists stressed the need for a commitment to defining priorities well in advance. On the public perception side, participants suggested that sufficient sustainable cause for the use of various means, continued integrity of motives, proportionality of method and use of covert intelligence as a last resort, democratic oversight and authority, and reasonable chance of success were all critical to the long-term credibility and viability of intelligence as a tool in combating terrorism.

With regard to the question of whether civil rights hindered combating terrorism, many of the participants objected to the opposition of the two as a false dichotomy, and sought to refine common assumptions about the debate. Panelists argued that civil rights were essential both in normative terms and on practical grounds due to the problems posed by popular alienation and radicalization. In specific terms, however, each presenter problematized the debate differently. One participant argued that the tradeoff was not new, so the real question was how far we needed to adapt in assessing this new threat. Other participants drew distinctions between rights and liberties, noting that there was more tension between liberty and security than between rights and security. One proposed that the existing framework for calibrating rights, freedoms, and obligations had not been so drastically undermined as to justify the abandonment of universal, non-negotiable rights and freedoms, particularly those prohibiting torture. Most other rights, she concluded, were qualified, and therefore the question was more about the equal and necessary application of policies. Another panelist concurred, arguing that the common conception of democratic states operating on the basis of a Hobbesian bargain whereby citizens surrendered liberties to gain security was fundamentally flawed because it allows the state to define security

and reduced the discussion to contractual terms. This conception had to be replaced by one in which the purpose of the state was to preserve freedoms. With regard to specific policy prescriptions, panelists concurred in their criticism of the development of specific “terrorism laws,” suggesting that the criminal model and criminal laws were sufficient to deal with the terrorist problem within the existing judicial framework.

The seminar series concluded with an examination of the durability of terrorism. Participants argued that terrorism was a phenomenon Western powers would have to grapple with indefinitely; they then moved on to discuss the policy implications of this reality. Panelists stressed the need for a unique, positive Western vision. One listed five requirements for implementing that vision: zero tolerance for armed service/police brutality and torture; the centrality of human rights; respectful and non-discriminatory immigration controls; strict adherence to the rule of law; and a convincing strategy for winning hearts and minds. Another participant pointed out that Western societies, and particularly their academic communities, could bring particular intellectual and moral resources to bear on the problem.

Seminar convenors

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