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Terrorism: ethics, effectiveness and enemies

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Discussions of terrorism usually contain unstated assumptions about ethics, effectiveness and "enemies." These assumptions usually serve to sideline nonviolent options. Ulf Sundhaussen's otherwise perceptive article fits this pattern.

Terrorism is nearly always assumed to be unethical. Indeed, the very label "terrorism" has become a hostile judgement disguised as a description (Gearty, 1997). In conventional western accounts of terrorism, there is a double standard: only terrorism by nonstate groups or US-government-defined "rogue states" is counted. Sundhaussen, like other critics, instead adopts a definition that includes terrorism by dominant states, especially the United States.

His next step is to focus on injustices experienced by oppressed groups such as the Palestinians. He argues that when an oppressed group is so weak that no other response has a chance, then armed action against civilians can have some justification, at least as much justification as violence perpetrated by oppressors.

This attention to justifying terrorism by the oppressed marginalises nonviolent options. Just because terrorism sometimes can be justified does not mean that nonviolent action can be ignored.

A second common assumption in discussions about terrorism is that violence is superior to nonviolence. Sundhaussen, in a few sentences, dismisses nonviolent options as ineffective. There is more to be said.

From a pragmatic point of view, setting aside ethical considerations for the moment, terrorism has little to recommend it. As a technique, it frequently outrages neutral observers and people among target groups. Nonstate terrorism, or in other words terrorism by the weak, is usually counterproductive because of this outrage factor. Sundhaussen notes that state terrorism is also sometimes counterproductive because it aggravates the injustices that give rise to nonstate terrorism.

Nonstate terrorism is seldom calculated, in a strategic sense, to bring about a beneficial result. Instead, it is often an undirected lashing out against perceived oppressors. What usually happens is far worse repression, apparently justified by the terrorism.

Some terrorists actually intend to trigger such repression because they expect the repression will cause greater outrage among oppressed groups and third parties, such as when, in response to a Palestinian suicide bombing, devastating Israeli raids generate international condemnation. Even in such cases, though, there is seldom any long-term advantage for the weaker group.

There are many examples where nonviolent action has been effective in situations where violence did not or could not have succeeded. The East Timorese armed struggle against the Indonesian military occupation made little headway over many years, with the cost of massive loss of life. After the liberation movement switched its emphasis from armed struggle in the countryside to nonviolent protest in the cities, it was able to stimulate much greater international support, eventually leading to independence (Fukuda, 2000).

Over many years, terrorist actions by the Palestine Liberation Organisation did little to advance the Palestinian cause. In contrast, the first intifada, initiated in 1987 independently of the PLO, was unarmed and largely nonviolent. It succeeded in generating much greater support, both within Palestine and internationally, than prior terrorist actions. Arguably, a more consistently nonviolent Palestinian strategy would have been even more effective (Dajani, 1995; Rigby, 1991). In contrast, suicide bombings during the second intifada since 2000 have alienated many potential supporters.

In South Africa, armed struggle did little to undermine apartheid. It was only when the challenge to apartheid shifted largely to nonviolent means that great progress was made (Zunes, 1999).

When the US government supported terrorism in Nicaragua in the 1980s via the Contras, its proxies, the opposition in the United States was entirely nonviolent. The efforts of many solidarity groups helped prevent a full-scale US military invasion of Nicaragua. Similarly, the global protests against military intervention in Iraq have helped to deter follow-on invasions of other countries. In contrast, imagine a terrorist attack on the US population sponsored by a Syrian or Iranian-based group: this would be the ideal way of softening up world opinion to permit a US invasion.

A third assumption in discussions about terrorism is that there is a solution to the problem that involves tackling a single source, which for convenience I call an enemy. In conventional anti-terrorism, the enemy is nonstate terrorists. In the counter discourse, the enemy is state terrorism.

Sundhaussen argues that the solution is change at the top, in the United States, through elections, with the newly elected leaders taking steps to remove the injustices that cause nonstate terrorism. There are two main weaknesses in this strategy.

First, there is a long history of US government support for repressive governments, with a continuity in policy over many administrations (Chomsky and Herman, 1979). Restraints on US wars and repression have come much more from citizen action than top-level policy initiatives.

A second weakness in the strategy of removing the injustices that lead to terrorism is that some terrorism is in support of *injustice*. Consider the Ku Klux Klan's violence against US black people over a century, or the violence of the Nazis in Germany in the 1920s, before Hitler came to power. In these and other cases, the challenge is to oppose violence without introducing yet more violence that serves to justify the other side's violence. Nonviolent action is better suited to achieve this.

During the US civil rights movement's use of nonviolent action in the 1950s and 1960s, violence by the Ku Klux Klan and police in southern US cities was highly counterproductive, putting pressure on the federal government to intervene (Chalmers, 2003). In comparison, in Germany the 1933 Reichstag fire, which appeared to be a violent anti-Nazi action, was used by the Nazis to their advantage.

Sundhaussen focusses on whether nonstate terrorism can be justified and whether US government

actions create a greater injustice than actions of its opponents. To supplement this critique, it is fruitful to examine how to make unjust violence counterproductive (Martin, 2004; Martin and Wright, 2003). Nonviolent action is ideally suited for this.

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