

Can Terrorism be Justified?

Can the supposedly indefensible be defended? For many the actions of Al-Qaeda are indefensible as they represent an assault on decency and the respect for human rights, not to mention the rule of law and the rules of acceptable military engagement. Responsible for dozens of terrorist acts including the infamous hijackings of September 11th 2001, Al-Qaeda is arguably the most infamous terrorist organization on the planet. Despite this of course, Al-Qaeda presently enjoys a global following and its leader Osama Bin Laden is a cult leader for many disaffected Muslims around the world. Can the acts of Al-Qaeda ever be defended? Can terrorism ever be justified? With the aim of addressing these questions while providing context on the global War on Terror, the following will explain the motivations for Al-Qaeda's violence while playing the devil's advocate. Are their motivations defensible? We now turn to an exploration of modern terrorism and a backgrounder on political violence and terrorism. Following this, the essay analyzes the major motivations for Al-Qaeda and asks whether or not their actions can be defended.

Introducing Terrorism

Terrorism remains one of the most important challenges to the stability of the international community in the 21st century. Not only do terrorist acts threaten governments and weaken economies, they also effectively destabilize societies.

Accordingly, the ramifications of terrorism can be felt within the nation-state as well for the international political system. Today, modern-day terrorists have global goals and they are unrestricted by the parameters of the domestic political system. Thus, terrorists today have international ambition and global reach. How does one define the term terrorist in the 21st century? Despite being notoriously difficult to define, a proper definition of terrorism is integral to this analysis. According to the most important expert on the phenomenon of suicide terrorism, Dr. Mia Bloom, terrorism is defined as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetuated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience (Bloom 3). Accordingly, we can thus say that a terrorist is an individual who engages in this behavior. This comprehensive definition will guide the essay as we seek to answer the question, is terrorism ever defensible?

Terrorist Motivations

Modern day terrorists are motivated by a variety of factors. Whether it is a national homeland in Ireland for the Irish Republican Army, terrorism is a political tool employed for a political purpose. Al-Qaeda's political violence has been motivated by numerous factors including US support for authoritarian dictatorships in the Middle East, American support for Israel, the American military presence in the holy land of Saudi Arabia and American unilateralism in the affairs of other states. The Al-Qaeda network has reportedly been responsible for a myriad of attacks beginning with Yemen in 1992 and continuing today as part of the Iraqi insurgency. The Al-Qaeda network, headed by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, has mastered the use of modern technology, including the internet as well as the Middle Eastern television network Al-Jazeera, to gain adherents to their global jihad. While their demands vary - from Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories to the overthrow of the conservative monarchy in Saudi Arabia - Al-Qaeda has engaged in terror in countries as diverse as Indonesia and Britain, the United States and Tanzania, as well as the United Kingdom and Morocco, just to name a few. Its reach truly is global. In fact, this particularly insidious network of jihadists represents the most pronounced threat to global peace and international security in modern times (Burke, 18-26 & BBC 2007).

American support for dictatorships in the Middle East (Egypt and Saudi Arabia to name a few) remains one of the most important motivations for Al-Qaeda violence today. Support for dictatorships in the Middle East emphatically demonstrates that cold, hard geopolitical factors

influence American state behavior and supersede any concern the United States may have for the promotion of human rights. Human rights abuses are routinely carried out in Egypt, where President Mubarak has resisted calls for democratic reform and remains president of the Egyptian Republic since the assassination of his predecessor Anwar Sadat in 1981. In power for more than three decades, he remains a staunch ally of the United States and this provides an important motivation for Al-Qaeda's political violence. Saudi Arabia is another notorious oppressor of human rights and commits rights violations against women, religious and sexual minorities on a near daily basis. Since Saudi Arabia is one of the world's largest producers of crude oil, the United States has ignored human rights violations in this country and has provided support to the autocratic Saudi monarchy since the early years of the twentieth century. Another important motivator for Islamic terrorists today is the American-led invasion of Iraq. The US invasion of Iraq of 2003, codenamed "Operation Iraqi Freedom" curiously was not undertaken following Saddam Hussein's genocide of the Kurdish minority in Halabja in 1988, nor after the violent suppression of a Shi'a insurgency following the First Gulf War. Instead US interests lie in securing the availability and continued flow of oil from one of the world's most important producers of this important natural resource. Although cloaked in rhetoric concerning the freedom of the Iraqi people, the invasion in fact has led to untold death on both sides, military occupation and a violent 6 year old insurgency. These have been the primary motivations for Al-Qaeda violence. In the eyes of Islamic terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, all of the factors above "justify" their political violence. Is this a justifiable defense? (Skidmore 207-228).

Is Terrorism Justifiable?

This essay has charted the emergence of modern global terrorism, growth of the Al-Qaeda network and chartered the primary motivations for the political violence perpetrated by this organization. Dr. Mia Bloom has provided an excellent definition of what constitutes terrorism and the targeting of civilians in an essential component of this definition. Can the actions of Al-Qaeda be defended? They can be understood in context but no, the targeting for innocents for political purposes cannot be reasonably defended. Grievances such as American support for Arab dictatorships, US unilateralism and the continued Arab-Israeli conflict are certainly legitimate grievances and worth pondering. Despite this, Al-Qaeda engages in "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetuated against noncombatant targets" (Bloom, 3) and thus is a terrorist organization which should be censured. Terrorism is also inherently destabilizing and wreaks havoc both politically and economically. Its violence cannot be justified.

Works Cited

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