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Political Violence: Retiring the Word Terrorism

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Founders of many modern states, including stalwarts of anti-terrorism like Israel and allies in the war on terror like the Kurds, achieved goals with political violence that killed innocent people and would be classified today as terrorism. Political violence should be recognised as a reflection of deep-seated social, economic and political problems -- rather than demonised through terms like terrorism or evil.

Commentary

RECENT DOCUMENTS uncovered by German magazine Der Spiegel trace the rise of the Islamic State to a network of former Iraqi intelligence officers loyal to toppled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. In 2003 they were deprived of their jobs with no future prospects when then US administrator of Iraq Paul Bremer disbanded the Baathist military and security forces. They were aided by Syrian military officers and officials who saw the group as a buffer against a feared US attempt to topple President Bashar al-Assad.

The history of the rise of the Islamic State as an extreme Sunni Muslim rejection of discrimination by a Shiite majority in Iraq and repressive dominance by an Alawite minority in Syria revives the notion of “one man’s freedom fighter is another’s terrorist”. That notion is similarly embedded in the policies of both Western nations and conservative Arab regimes concerned about their survival. They not only forged cooperation with Turkey’s Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and Syria’s Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) but also Gulf support for the jihadist Syrian rebel group Jabhat al Nusra that is locked in battle with Islamic State and in Western distinctions between good and bad foreign fighters.

Good and bad fighters

‘Bad foreign fighters’, angry at the human and political cost of combatting political violence with a military rather than a predominantly political campaign, are the thousands who have joined the ranks of Islamic State; ‘good foreign fighters’ are those who have gone to Syria to fight with the Kurds against the jihadists, particularly during last year’s battle for the besieged Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani.

The notion is also evident in the US National Intelligence’s most recent report to Congress that for the

first time in years no longer includes Iran or the Tehran-backed Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah as a terrorist threat to US interests.

The list of internationally - recognised political leaders who can trace their roots to political violence and terrorism is long. Yet, they and their predecessors disavowed what is termed political violence once they achieved their goals. The list includes Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu, whose ideological roots like those of former Israeli leaders Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, lie in the use of political violence and terrorism in pre-state Palestine without which the State of Israel most likely would not have been established. Both Begin and Shamir were wanted commanders of Irgun, a group denounced as terrorist by the British Mandate authorities.

Similarly, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas hails from a movement that was long condemned as a terrorist organisation. While nothing justifies the killing of innocent civilians, recognition of Palestinians as a people with national rights and the creation of the Palestine Authority would most probably not have occurred without Palestinian attacks in the 1960s and 1970s on civilian targets.

Finally, the PKK, an organisation deemed terrorist by Ankara and its Western allies as well as its Syrian counterpart, the YPG, are de facto allies in the fight against Islamic State, the jihadist organisation that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq that employs brutality as a means of governance. The list is far longer: think of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC), the aging leaders of Algeria or the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

The sole common denominator of all these examples is not an ideology but a political grievance and a belief, right or wrong, that the odds were stacked against them and that violence was a necessity rather than a goal in and of itself. Political violence is a tactic most often employed and frequently with success by those opposed to forces with overwhelming military might.

A moment of lucidity

All of these men and groups who today are either respected political leaders or on their way to returning to the international fold saw political violence as a means of the underdog to secure their perceived rights and right an injustice rather than as a criminal philosophy and practice implicit in the use of the word terrorism.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, in a moment of lucidity, implicitly recognised the underlying politics when he last year acknowledged that American Muslims had stressed to him that the absence of an Israeli-Palestinian peace was fuelling anger on the streets and recruitment by Islamic State. "People need to understand the connection of that ... it has something to do with humiliation and denial and absence of dignity," Kerry said.

All of this is not to justify the use of political violence, the killing of innocent civilians or the extremist ideology and brutality of groups like Islamic State. Nor does it justify the indiscriminate torture of large numbers or mass rapes of women as a means of control. It is, however, recognising a political reality however unpleasant that may be.

Debunking de-politicisation

That reality involves acknowledging political violence for what it is and debunking efforts to depoliticise the roots of political violence that only serve to evade often painful political choices involved in confronting underlying grievances. It also involves accepting that it is politics, rather than military force and law enforcement, that offers the tools to effectively resolve situations that produce political violence.

It also serves to spotlight the fact that terms like 'terrorism' and 'fighting evil' turn the struggle against political violence into a zero-sum game in which victory constitutes the elimination of barbarians who, with problems unresolved, bounce back from setbacks in new, far more brutal guises.

Bombastic statements by Western leaders designating political violence termed terrorism, particularly in the case of jihadists, as an existential threat and an epic struggle against a form of totalitarianism comparable to that of fascism and communism, has only served to raise the profile and appeal of

brutal perpetrators like Islamic State. The numbers speak for themselves: University of Maryland research shows that jihadist attacks had tripled in 2013 compared to 2010.

Political violence may be a scourge, yet it is fundamentally an act of politics. Recognising this makes politics rather than predominantly military force the appropriate response. A first step towards that recognition would be removing the term terrorism from the debate in a bid to eliminate ideological prejudice that serves vested interests and at best complicates the search for real solutions to real problems.

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