The Definition Of Terrorism

Terrorism is one of the hottest problems the world should tackle with. It imposes a great danger on civilians and threatens the lives of innocent people. It is an act that victimizes people indiscriminately and ruthlessly. It also imposes a real challenge on the international community that should be confronted collectively and according to acceptable international standards. However, terrorism is a very complicated phenomenon and dealing with it requires so much effort, coordination, persistence and expenses.

Terrorism has claimed so many lives all over the world and caused so much destruction and very painful atrocities. In the Philippines, Cambodia, Japan, Chile, Palestine, Egypt and so many other countries, terrorism has taken its toll. And lately it hit the United States. This last terrorist act against the World Trade Center is probably the most brutal in the history of mankind and the largest in magnitude. It has exceeded all imagination and gone beyond even the expectations of the United States. The US was expecting a kind of chemical or biological terrorist act, but the hit came in a way that apparently never came to the thoughts of the FBI or the CIA. The attack was so horrible and the damage extensive.

The phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars and intellectuals all over the world. So many articles have been written in different newspapers and magazines in different languages, research papers have been conducted and books published. For the benefit of the reader, I just mention few examples: Norman Antokol, Mayer Nudell, No One A Neutral; Jonathan Trucker, Toxic Terror; Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism; Walter Laquaur, A History Of Terrorism; Paul Pillar, Terrorism & The US Policy.

Since terrorism has been spreading almost everywhere in the world, coordinated efforts are becoming more and more necessary. But first, the international community should agree on a certain definition of terrorism and on certain standards according to which a certain act would be judged as terrorist or not. So far there has been so much disagreement in the international community on how to define terrorism. Some states say that terrorism is an act taken by individuals and illegal organizations against civil targets and innocent people. This was adopted to a great extent by the President of the US when he asserted in a speech on April 15, 2002 that terrorism is an act to kill civilians for the achievement of political goals. But on different occasions he tied his definition with individuals and groups excluding governments and states. His definition coincides with that of the State Department which states that terrorism is a "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." (Council on Foreign Relations, Terrorism: an Introduction).

Paul Pillar who worked as deputy chief of the CIA's Counter-terrorist Center gave terrorism characteristics that go in harmony with the definition of the State Department.

He said that terrorism is intentional and premeditated but not a spontaneous reaction or an act of rage; it is political not criminal; carried out by sub-national groups not by a state or an army and aims at civilians not at military targets. (Council on Foreign Relations, Terrorism: An Introduction).

Some people say that the definition should not be limited to groups or individuals and should be expanded to include governments. Governments could be terrorists too. A dictatorship that is repressive and ruthless is a terrorist government, and those governments that wish to impose their will on weaker states by force are also terrorists. While some argue that some organizations are not actually terrorists as they could be described by some people; rather, they are freedom-fighters.

A scholar defined terrorism as a premeditated use of force to influence people directly or indirectly, morally and/or materially to deter them from taking an action or force them to act in a favorable way. (Kassem, Al Resala Newspaper, November 15, 2001) This definition does not exclude states or any other entities, but it is hard to gain consensus because almost everybody turns to be in a way or another a terrorist. However, it could be satisfying for nongovernmental organizations that defend human rights such as the United Nations Committees, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and Amnesty Human Rights Watch.

Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) that defend human rights insist that there are governments that practice terrorism against their own citizens. These governments use their security service and armies to silence their own peoples and punish those who speak up against the internal policies or the corruption that is practiced on a wide-scale. They say that some of these governments have practiced genocide and ruthlessly treated the opposition. (Amnesty International Annual Reports 1994, pp 31-7; 1993 pp 18-23) Since there are so many governments of this sort around the world, these non-governmental organizations don't have many friends. Amnesty international does not talk directly about terrorism but about the violation of human rights. All acts that violate human rights as stated in international conventions should be condemned regardless of their source. In its annual reports, the society makes a brief survey of violations committed by states and governments. The US, Canada and Britain are generally listed. (See for example the report of 1995 p 245 and pp 324-27)

The NGO's are not concerned about politics but about humanity. They do not spend their time in making accusations but in lifting human suffering. Regardless of the reasons, they think that states should honor human rights inside and outside their borders.

Although the argument over the definition is world wide, the gap is particularly broad between the US and some states of the Middle East. The US insists that the definition should concentrate only on individual and group behavior while some countries of the Middle East insist that states could be terrorists too. The major issue in the heated discussion is Israel. Some say that Israel practices terrorism against the Arabs particularly the Palestinians. The Arabs argue that Israel, against the principles of human rights, has uprooted the Palestinians and unwilling to let the refugees back to their homes and

property. If this type of approach is accepted then the US will face accusation because of its military and economic support for Israel, and because of other acts on the international level such as the landing of its troops in Grenada. On the other hand, the US accuses Arab states such as Syria and Iraq of housing or aiding organizations that are labeled by the US as terrorists. The argument is that that organizations such as Hizb Allah and Hamas carry military actions against Israel while the problem of the Middle East should be solved on the table of negotiations. The US condemns the suicide bombings that the Palestinians carry out against the Israelis, and justifies Israeli attacks against the Palestinians as acts of self-defense and anti-terrorism. (An example is the statements made on April 12, 2002) The White House and the State Department have labeled several Mid-eastern states and factions as terrorists or aiding terrorists such as Iran, Iraq and Libya.

As a response to US accusations, the Lebanese minister of foreign affairs stated before TV cameras on April 16, 2002 that one needs to differentiate between a fight aiming at national liberation and other types of fighting. The same thing has been said by the Lebanese prime minister who declared that the fight against Israel is a one of national liberation, it is legitimate and in accordance with international conventions that guarantee the right of peoples under occupation to repel the occupying force. The same thing has been asserted by the Syrian president who declared on March 28, 2002 that the Arabs should be clear in adopting resistance against occupation and should not be terrorized by accusations of others. These Arab leaders have been actually responding to the accusations made by the US that Palestinian and Lebanese factions that fight Israel are terrorists.

Edward Said who is a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University says that the US wants to have a monopoly on the definition so as to justify its own foreign policy particularly vis a vis Israel. (International Socialist Review, Issue 19, July-August 2001). Abdul Qader Tash, an Arab scholar says that Israel is a terrorist state and the Arabs are just responding to the American sponsored terrorism. (Terrorism & resistance, Washington Report On The Middle East, Issue of March 1998).

Kingsbury refers to Palestinian suicide bombings that killed fifteen Israelis saying that that was a reaction to an Israeli air attack that killed eight Palestinians. Although the writer points that both sides practice terrorism, she explains that Israel demolishes houses and destroys historical caves so as to pave the way for more settlements on Palestinian land. Israeli measures of torturing, impoverishing and killing Palestinians, she says, aim at forcing Palestinians to flee their homeland. The same as Palestinians, Israel is involved in killing civilians, and adds that the only difference is that Israel uses American taxpayer's money to do so. Israel receives an annual sum of $2.23 billion from the US in military aid. (Kingsbury, The Capital times)

Reaching a definition

It is unwise to leave the issue open to different definitions that reflect different state interests. In a civilized and advanced world like ours, the issue should be approached

scientifically and with objectivity. Collectivity requires a kind of consensus. To achieve this, one needs to examine the following possibilities:

1: To have the different parties that represent the different views get together and reach a common definition through the negotiating table. The Arab states have been trying to get the US to discussing the problem, but the US supported by Britain think that it is not time to put the question on an international table.

2- To submit the issue to the United Nations. The UN is a suitable place since terrorism is an international issue. Every state has the opportunity to participate in the activities of the UN, a thing that guarantees a better level of objectivity.

3- Leave the issue for the NGO's. Probably the NGO's guarantee the highest level of objectivity because they are not under strong pressure of private or state interests. These organizations try to understand international law and human rights in a scientific unbiased way, and it is expected that they would approach the issue with even-handedness. This is, of course, different from the states that are almost led by their interests, and from the UN that is influenced to a certain extent by the superpowers. I personally prefer this possibility because I trust the NGO's more than states.

The problem remains within the hands of the concerned states that would like to monopolize the definition of terrorism. The world is becoming smaller as the days pass and it is thought that it is the interest of everybody to deal with others in a spirit of reconciliation. Otherwise, it would be very hard to coexist in an atmosphere of cooperation.

I should ascertain that spontaneous and angry reactions might be satisfying psychologically but they do not solve the problem. Only scientific approaches and well-studied plans might bring effective and positive results. Ahead of us is not only the fight against terrorism but also the struggle against its causes.

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Statements made by the White House and the State Department.

Tash, Abdul Qader, "Terrorism and Resistance," <u>Washington Report On The Middle East</u>, March, 1998.