

ABOUT TACTICAL AND STRATEGIC TERRORISTS WHAT PATH FOR HAMAS AND HIZBALLAH?

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The search for a definition of terrorism is still ongoing within the corridors of the United Nations. There may be no practical way but to speak of terrorism in the singular when working on an international convention, but is it operationally useful to speak of terrorists as if they were clones of each other, the products of the same root causes and to be fought with the same tools and using the same approach? The popular discourse on the root causes of terrorism may also be misleading if there exist different types of terrorist groups. Are the terrorist groups we came to know twenty and thirty years ago distinct from those that came to fame over the last decade?

From the IRA to Al Qaeda

As a matter of principle, governments do not negotiate with terrorist groups or at least they take the political position that they do not. Often Governments rely on informal actors to handle the brunt negotiations with such groups. This policy allows for discourse without the consequences associated with government involvement.

In the mid nineties, the US Government engaged in negotiations with Gerry Adams, leader of what some called the political wing of the IRA and whom the UK Government had defined as a terrorist.

The negotiations, were spearheaded by a group of Irish-American private citizens prominent in the business community. Their efforts eventually led to the Good Friday agreements of 1998.

Earlier in that decade and indeed since the late eighties the operations that freed the last eleven Western Hostages held in Lebanon\ was carried out with the full knowledge of the US, the UK and Germany and Israel. The negotiations were led by a non national of those countries in an anomalous operation conducted through the office of the UN

Secretary General.

Tactical terrorists

1) The IRA and Hizballah, by the time those **negotiations** were undertaken, had been involved in military operations for quite a while; both had used violence against civilians as a weapon of choice in order to achieve their declared aims. Yet both found a way to “negotiate” indirectly at least, with their declared enemies. To be sure the decision to enter negotiations is ultimately that of the terrorist groups for it implies a choice to limit, at least partially and temporarily, some of their terrorist activities. And definitely negotiating with the enemy sends out a message to their supporters that may be at variance with the rhetoric of their position. Entering into negotiations, whether directly or indirectly, whether in orthodox or unorthodox ways is one of the factors that defines what kind of group we are dealing with. It may even help us to understand more about it. Neither in Beirut and in Belfast the intermediaries were impartial: in the Irish case it was made clear that the use of violence was not acceptable to the intermediary and in the case of Lebanon the UN negotiator was never asked to show an understanding for the taking of innocent civilians as hostages. . This in itself says a lot about the groups. In other words, there was no claim that they alone knew the truth and that everybody else who disagreed was wrong.

2) There was another commonality between the IRA and Hezbollah: they both had/have **a political wing and a military wing**. The two-headed structure of these groups is also very telling about their modus operandi and most of all about their future ambitions. The political wing provides the opportunity to interface with one part of the world that the military wing does not. It signals that the group, beyond armed conflict, stakes a role in the social fabric of the society it is rooted in and last, but not least, it may imply a potential for transformation. This may be remote, but nevertheless a potential exists.

The IRA and Hizballah were not born at the same time thus their journey moves along a different calendar. By the time Hezbollah was created in the early eighties, the IRA had been active for many years. No comparisons that can be made in guessing the future of

one or another of the groups that had embraced violence against civilians as a means to an end. While every case is unique, some features may help to understand the *modus operandi* not only in the present but also in the future.

A credible two headed structure takes time to be established and in the case of these two groups it manifested itself eventually with the election of some its members to local parliaments. As of late the electoral victory of Hamas has led many to speculate about the future path of the new ruling party of the Palestinians. Can a political structure which includes elected representatives continue to coexist forever with a militant military wing poised to use violence against civilians? .

3) The **political objective** of these groups is also characteristically **well known**.

Openly declared, and at least in rhetoric, it has remained **unchanged** over time. Accordingly the area of operation is, by and large, quite limited and again well known to friends and foes.

As the objective was/is germane to the place of birth of these groups, that attempts to convert the world are not of their manifesto.

Their ideology, so to speak, is tempered by a sense of reality which smells more of real politick than of holy war, both at the local and international level. The clarity of the goal means specificity and focus.

4) It follows that for these groups the **enemy** is also well defined and **limited**. These are groups that have been very careful in not creating – unnecessary - enemies for themselves, thus further defining the boundaries of their struggle. This care in avoiding the creation of more fronts is another aspect of the more traditional kind of terrorist groups we have known for decades.

I call these groups the **tactical terrorists**. Tactical terrorism was and is used as a means to achieve a very focused and, in a sense, limited political goal with a possibility of adjusting to real politick along the way.

Strategic terrorists

1) Over the last ten years or so we have witnessed the emergence of a new kind of terrorists exemplified by organizations like Al Qaeda type. They provided a polar image tactical terrorist groups. I call them strategic terrorists for their objectives go much beyond the redress of what they perceive are injustices and humiliation at the local level.

The weltanschauung they offer is one of deep exclusion of “the other” which is rooted in an ideology of religious overtones and the arrogance of being alone in possession of the truth on every single issue. The “takfiri” imprint is at the core of that vision. Thus **negotiations have no place** in the vision of the new terrorists.

Perhaps an example of this is the way the Al Qaeda types of groups have dealt with hostage taking.

A cursory review of this phenomenon over the last ten years indicates that hostage taking by these kind of groups have resulted in the murdering of the hostage well over 60% of the times, (in fact it may well be that those who were released were not being held by Al Qaeda types); this compares with less than 10% murder rate over a period of 25 years if one analyzes the hostage taking by tactical terrorists. In the latter case negotiations were the norm, in the former case real negotiations have been the exception.

2) The new terrorist organizations do not seem to be structured with a political and a military wing but rather with numerous **operational wings** of different levels of decision making that have no overt contact with the outside world. Thus their stake-holding role in the local society is practically nonexistent. Clearly there have not been cases of declared members of Al Qaeda running for elections.

3) The objective or I should say **objectives, have varied** over time since the mid nineties: from the defeat of the “other super power”, regime change in Saudi Arabia, to the Palestinian cause, to the overthrow of President Musharaff and so forth: however one objective has remained the same but that is a **cosmic objective**: the creation of a caliphate of all believers.

4) This assures a state of **perpetual war** and accordingly a **perpetual enemy**.

Indeed without an enemy Al Qaeda would melt like snow in the sun. This is a major difference with the tactical terrorist groups. The latter ones may well continue to exist without enemy; the former have an existential need for an enemy.

Accordingly these new groups do not worry about making **more** ; in fact it serves their purpose. This explains the growth of their target list: from the Hazara tribe in Afghanistan to other Shiite groups, to India and Russia, to China and only later to the West and various Muslim countries.

I call them the **strategic terrorists** for their objective goes much beyond the re-address of perceived grievances.

Put simply, they are moved by a global strategy .The ideology is that of the monopoly of truth. The mentality is at the very origin of extremism of all kinds and indeed of exclusion for those who do not share the same truth are simply wrong and are enemies.

Clearly any ideology based on dogmas has the potential of generating more and more confrontation.

This total commitment to confrontation with the “other” and the claim to an identity which is not nation state-based but rather born out of a borderless “umma”, are ingredients of an ideology that does not accept any coexistence between Islam and modernity or otherwise said between Islam and the West. In other words, the Al Qaeda ideology seems to stem from the “takfiri” interpretation of religion and the political vision of Hizb at-Tahrir. From Takfirism Al Qaeda takes the dogmatic position to decide alone who can call himself Muslim and therefore to solely establish who is “kufri”(infidel) and from the Hizb at-Tahrir it takes the vision that there is no compromise with the West for the objective is to re-establish a Caliphate based not on the concept of nation state, but of a unified “umma” without frontiers.

In this respect, strategic terrorism represents a challenge, an ideological challenge to the Arab and other Islamic nation states which tactical terrorism never did. Tactical terrorism does not dispute the concept of nation state, in fact it operates within the bounds of a nationalistic weltanschauung.

Yet Al Qaeda is only one manifestation, of the political ideology born in the fifties and embodied by Hizb at-Tahrir (the party of liberation). It has chosen to take the path of violence in its efforts to pursue the ultimate objective of a world caliphate of the believers –not fragmented by the division of nation states- and in perpetual confrontation with the world of the non believers. But another conceivable way of pursuing that objective is a slow infiltration of the institutions of the nation states be them in Islamic countries or in the West.

It is likely that the process of infiltration has already started setting the next stage of a confrontation between the ideology of Hizb at-Tahrir and the international system.

These groups would not be deterred from pursuing their cosmic objective by the solution of any regional issue not even the Palestinian question. Their struggle would continue irrespective of what may or may not happened on the western shores of the Jordan River.

Not so for the groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

What next for Hamas and Hizballah

As tactical terrorists, they have chosen an more limited geographical theater of operations. Their political and social role in their respective societies has increased over the years. Most importantly perhaps their interaction at the regional level has also increased. The military wing of these organizations is, of course, a way to reinforce their political position but at the same time it is a sign of weakness. In other words would a political role alone be sustainable without a military wing?

Tactical terrorists groups are by and large politically driven while the strategic terrorist groups are by and large ideologically driven. As such the latter are beyond reach while the former have engaged in different ways the “others” and have not rejected been “reached”. Is the military apparatus of the tactical terrorists their last card for negotiations? Their military wing has not yet become inactive or incorporated into the national army. Is a a de facto long term truce on attacks on civilians e in the making?

Hizballah and Hamas are part of their own national scenes but also of a larger regional

scene.

The variables here are several and all would have a direct impact on the evolution of either groups.

A scenario where Iran was to enter in “ a grad bargain” with the West or with the US, that is to say all issues on the table, would necessarily carry implications for the very nature of the -Hizballah relation and accordingly on the future of the Lebanese group.

Similarly a scenario where Saudi Arabia took a higher profile on the Palestinian issue by “ giving new impetus to the Abdullah plan” , the impact on Hamas may equally be significant.

How much Israel with all its political and military tools may actually change the nature of those two groups remains to be seen.

It is said that it was the Russian mothers who were the major force behind the end of the Soviet adventure in Afghanistan and so were the Israeli mothers with regard to the withdrawal from Lebanon.

The constituencies of Hizballah and Hamas would also have a say. While the jury is still out as far as the evolution of these two groups is concerned , an indication of where they are going can be found in their “need of an enemy” in order to exist. If they do need an enemy to continue their existence then they would not evolve; if not, they may well do.

Accordingly one should ask : are their leaders able to lead without enemy?

A battle of ideas to reach those on the fence.

Tactical terrorists pursue a political objective within the construct of the existing international system of the nation states and the geographical boundaries of a specific region. Strategic terrorists pursue a clash of civilizations.

It follows that the approaches which were used to deal with the IRA or ETA would not apply to the so called Al Qaeda type of groups. Negotiations are not the instrument of choice in this latter case, in fact their roots, both political and religious, rule out any option of compromise or indeed peaceful coexistence with “the other”.

Furthermore, when dealing with strategic terrorists we may have to distinguish between the actual militants and operatives and their sympathizers. In dealing with the operatives the “police-intelligence-military-law enforcement approach” can hardly be dismissed but when focusing on the sympathizers, namely those who are still on the fence and have not yet chosen a active militancy perhaps another instrument could be tried. The strategic terrorists cannot be reach by diplomatic means and convinced to negotiate. The dogma on which their actions and vision are predicated made them , by and large, unreachable.

There where terrorism has been a feature for decades, success has been achieved mainly through one instrument: infiltration, by far the most successful approach. Whether this is even feasible with the strategic terrorist groups is too early to say. Because of the “international nature” of these groups infiltration implies a coalition of countries for some may be better predisposed and equipped to conduct infiltration than others.. Infiltration is best done by those who share the territory, the culture, the language and are familiar with the weltanschauung of the terrorists. The issue is whether the strategic terrorists have already infiltrated the institutions and societies of which they seek the destruction.

There is no battle of ideas going of with the operatives; there is no possible political compromise with the strategic terrorists , there are no hearts and minds to be reached .

But the sympathizers who are still on the fence, the young people who are attracted by ways and means to “ change society” and re-address injustice and humiliation, they indeed should be the focus of the world attention: a battle of ideas to reach their hearts and mind appears to be a logical approach. That battle has not started yet. Focused as many were on the militants , and understandably so, we may have forgotten to center our attention as well on those who have yet to decide what side of the fence to jump to. They are the pool where the militants will go for recruiting ; but equally they may reject the bait and choose a different path for their life. What has the other side, the non-extremists offered to those who are on the fence? In fact have they been approached at all by the non –extremists part of our societies?

The battle of ideas to reach the hearts and minds of those on the fence has not been waged as yet. There is no strategy, no focus and no coalitions..

In fact at times incoherent efforts though well meant may have been counterproductive

for they had no strategy and no focus. Unfortunately such kind of efforts continue both in academia and in international institutions and are likely to be even more counterproductive.

We would have a better chance if we pursued a coalition of all those who fear not to be called moderate, silent majority, in other words the large majority of people in every society around the globe.

We may well need to shape a “global coalition of the sane”, as Prince Hassan of Jordan used to call it. A coalition of the sane would have to be pursued across divides of all kinds and under a flag that would be recognized to be their own by the old man in Montreal and the young woman in Jakarta.

The idea of a “dialogue among civilizations” could have been seized as a means to create an anti-terrorist manifesto for the entire world of “regular” people. Not only was that opportunity missed a few years ago but it may even have been misused. Simplistically and unwisely there were those who rushed to organize meetings and conferences and seminars of all kinds “framed as a debate between Islam and the West”. By framing it in that way we may have deepened a gap between the two “civilizations”. Such an approach created the image that there is an existential chasm between those two sides. Instead the real divide is not along civilizational lines, for the great majority of individuals in the West and in the Islamic world have no problem of communicating and understanding each other and indeed in sharing values and more; the problems are between the extremists (and they exist in both sides), and the large silent majority of both sides. Furthermore by framing the discourse along civilizational lines of two groups only, the international discourse seems to have projected the image that there is a clear cut boundary between civilizations when in reality that is far from the truth. Where is the border between Islam and the West, in Istanbul, or in London? But cultural and political initiatives, framed in that manner, continue to proliferate thus cementing even more the concept of a border line, a separation, a gap, and a divide between two cultural “blocs” as it were, even where there may not be one. Thus even those who are on the fence in both “blocs” are lumped together with the extremes. The strategic terrorists have thus been given a gift, they have been made part and parcel of an entire civilization, of its majority,

rather than a marginal group. The narrative about Islam and the West may become a self fulfilling prophecy. That was not the purpose of the original call for dialogue among civilizations.

To re-direct the international discourse by stressing that the real divide is between extremists and “regular people”, will take some time but it may be the only way to take on seriously the battle for the hearts and minds of those on the fence. The anti-terrorist manifesto, or better yet the anti-extremists manifesto or flag would help to coalesce the vast majority across many divides but united by their rejection of extremism and their acceptance of diversity as an element of growth and betterment rather than as a threat and the equal dignity of human beings irrespective of their religious or cultural affiliation. Extremists believe in single and exclusive identity. This *weltanschauung* is at the core of many conflicts and of many fundamentalisms. The illusion of a single identity should be at the core of dialogue; instead many of the initiatives undertaken so far did not even tackle the issue in a general way. Actually they seem to take for granted that we all have a single and exclusive identity; in other words they deepen the divide instead of helping. The reality is that we all have multiple identities which overlap rather than exclude. The need to underline our multiple and non exclusive identities is even more evident in a world where interdependence is on the increase and furthermore how can any single human being be defined by “one adjective alone”? Can a human being be defined with one word? The battle of ideas does require also a new discourse and a new way of defining identity. After all the illusion of a single identity has been at the root of conflict and barbarities for millennia. Yet a change of vision is now possible because of our interconnected world and the ability we all have to impact each other across divides of all kinds..

Instead of “Islam and the West” conferences, we better devise fora where individuals from all four corners of the world, all cultural denominations and faiths as well as atheists, agnostics and those who simply refuse to wear their religion on their sleeves, in other words the “non-extremists” of all kinds, would face up to their multiple and at time common identities, realize thus that we share some dimension of our identities with some part of the world and other dimensions with others and agree on a fairly short

manifesto of common sense for a large global coalition of the non extremists.

That flag or manifesto, would then need the voice of the role models of our societies to be appealing to the young and the not so young: role models, who I am afraid, would not come from the institutions only, but from various sectors of life. The idols of today may be athletes or actors, entrepreneurs or writers, they also have a role in the fight against terrorism and a bigger role than they may think. To involve in these matters only the “usual suspects”, like academics or former politicians with scarce popular appeal, would not do. The advocates of a coalition of the sane would need to raise their voice in favor of the large majority of the world who does not have the arrogance to believe they own the truth alone and that they are on the side of God, but has instead the wisdom to know we are simply in continuous search of the truth and we just would be lucky if God was occasionally on our side. That voice, to be heard, has to come from individuals with high credibility not in the corridors of powers, but in the streets of the world.

On the short term we have to confront the militants on the ground to protect civilians, on the medium term we need to prepare for the battle of ideas which may win over the potential sympathizers of today’s militant extremists by pulling together a larger and larger majority across the globe.

A strategy for a global coalition is needed, a coalition of peoples across geographical and political borders: paradoxically to some, that may be a task for “leaders who can lead without enemy.” To win the battle of ideas against those who need an enemy to be, and who base their creed on the clash with “the other”, we need leaders who are builders, who offer positive values and can articulate their vision without the need of the enemy-figure. Do they exist?

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