How Does Terrorism Lend Itself to Constructivist Understanding?

Since the 9/11 attacks, traditional IR scholars have been finding it quite difficult to understand the War on Terror (WoT), the working of al-Qaeda, or anything to do with its Islamic ideologies. Rationalist approaches such as Realism and Liberalism, hardly had anything to contribute to the understanding of 9/11 attacks motivated by religious convictions. 'Constructivism seemed best placed in evaluating terrorism,' though constructivist exploration into terrorism has been few and far between (Lynch, 2006).

This essay takes a two-pronged approach in finding how terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding and evaluating why constructivism is better placed compared to the other traditional IR theories. The essay proposes that the fundamental nature of terrorism being a 'social construct' lends itself to constructivist understanding. To illustrate this, I use insights from a metaphorical approach, used in constructing al-Qaeda, the antagonist in the WoT. Taking the case of 'al-Qaeda's constructivist turn,' the essay finds out how the transnational terrorist group fits into the constructivist framework.

In the process of evaluating constructivism's place among prominent IR theories in terrorism research, the essay claims that constructivist theories are best suited to analyze how identities and interests can change over time. Further, this is essential in understanding the diverse and ever-changing state responses to transnational terrorism. While proving the above claim through the case study of German and Japanese counter terrorism policies and a metaphorical analysis of a German tabloid, I show that constructivists help identify new facets of terrorism.

It was not just the cold war that came as a rude shock to the Realists and Liberals, terrorism and the post 9/11 world posed greater challenges. The 9/11 attacks emphasized the importance of 'understanding culture, identity, religion, and ideas' through international relations theory. The failure of traditional IR scholars in predicting the end of the Cold War made space for Constructivism, the social theory of international politics.

Constructivists came up with an interesting rationalization to the end of Cold war: It came to an end because 'President Mikhail Gorbachev revolutionized the Soviet Foreign policy as he embraced new ideas such as common security' (Walt, 1998). Constructivists looked at terrorism with equal vigour; and analyzed different shades of interests and identities of state and non-state (terrorist) actors to understand the interaction between the two.

Alexander Wendt (1992), a core social constructivism scholar, insists that International Relations, 'is not a given, but constructed.' He emphasizes 'the impact of ideas and identities, how they are created, how they evolve and shape the way states respond to a situation' – all those which were overlooked by the Rationalists. (Walt, 1998) According to Wendt (1992), identities tell 'who or what actors are' and are 'not developed, sustained or transformed' whereas interests refer to 'what actors want.' He claims that 'interactions shape identities.'

Constructivism is often identified through Wendt's central thought -'anarchy is what states make of it.' Wendt believes that anarchy is socially constructed by individual states, based on their 'identities' and how they create their own security dilemmas. Arguing that Realists fail to explain why conflicts exist between states (Walt, 1998), Wendt claims that a state's construction of anarchy is based on how it sees 'the self and the other' through its shared

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cultural understandings that 'arise out of interactions.' While Wendt's claim mainly related to inter-state 'interactions', the idea extends to the interaction between state and non-state (terrorist) actor as well. Counter-terrorism lends itself to Wendt's understanding of the three 'cultures of anarchy,' which also depend on 'how identities are defined.' In fact, terrorism and counter-terrorism is 'what states make of it.'

However, Wendt's central idea has been put through several challenges. Observing that Wendt wants 'identities to be constructed, but in some ways given.' Zehfuss (2001), claims of a 'dangerous liaison between identity and constructivism.' Wendt (1999) refuted such claims; but also managed to refine his argument, while embracing his central idea: 'International Relations are constructed.' Speaking of a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' that 'sustains identities and interests,' he holds that repeated interactions can form 'stable identities.' However, 'identity formation is also possible when a shared culture already exists.'

Constructivism's Relevance to Terrorism

First of all, 'terrorism is a social construction' as what sociological thinkers believe it to be. 'Terrorism is not a 'given' in the real world; it is instead an interpretation of events and their presumed causes.' (Yehuda, 1993) The oft-quoted statement that 'One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' reminds us that the definition of terrorism is based on how it is being constructed by an individual or state. 'The meaning of 'terrorism' varies depending on the context, available cultural resources, and combinations of people involved.' (Stump, 2009) Terrorism does not exist outside our subjective understandings. Constructivism just reminds us that terrorism is a social fact, 'which requires human institutions for its existence' (Searle, 1995).

Considering terrorism as a social construction allows investigation into 'unthinkable policies' to counter it. The construction of terrorism as a 'social threat' and the extent of threat inflation by a social constructivist can be seen in the intensity of a counter terrorism policy.

Metaphorical Insights into Terrorism

Images of terror exist in different levels of construction. A metaphorical analysis made by Spencer (2012) on a terrorism discourse between 2001 and 2005 in The Sun, a British tabloid newspaper, explains how terrorism lends itself to constructivist understanding, and specifically how such constructions influence policy making.

The metaphorical analysis constructs terrorism as 'a war, a crime, an uncivilised evil and a disease.' These are what contributed to the formulation of certain counter-terrorism policies, such as 'military reaction, judicial measures, and immigration policies, while excluding responses such as negotiations.' (Spencer, 2012)

The 9/11 attack was initially associated with Pearl Harbour and references were made to 'kamikazi tactics.' Osama Bin Laden was called a 'war lord' who declared war against the West. The use of words such as 'troops,' 'army,' 'battlefield,' and 'forces,' in the media, represented 'terrorism as war,' (Spencer, 2012) and guided states into 'responding militarily' (Jeffrey, 1987).

From 2004 onwards, terrorism was 'metaphorised' as a 'crime.' Terrorists, who were initially called 'suicide squads' and 'soldiers' were later identified as 'murderers.' In fact, the aftermath of a battle was identified as a 'crime scene' rather than a 'war zone.' The influence of this 'tabloid' construction of 'terrorism as crime' can be seen in the UK counter terrorism policies post-9/11. (Spencer, 2012) 'The view that terrorism is crime (obviously) leads (states) to favour legal solutions' (Sederberg, 1995).

Another metaphorical construction recognized terrorism as an 'uncivilised evil' and called terrorists 'barbarians who mercilessly kill people without any purpose,' thus stopping governments from reasoning out the acts of terrorist. Thereby, it justified 'extreme' measures of countering terrorism, which was reflected in the British counter-terrorism policy that focused on 'immigration regulations 'since 9/11 (Spencer, 2012).

However, the breakdown of such metaphorical analysis leads us to several questions: Why was there a change in

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metaphorical constructions? Why has al-Qaeda changed, in our constructions? What sort of impact do these metaphors have on counter-terrorism policies? The reasons for change in the way media constructed terrorism remain unanswered. However, a Hulsse and Spencer (2008) investigation into metaphorical constructions of terrorism by the German media suggests that the change might have to do 'with our getting used to al-Qaeda terrorism.' Further, it questions if terrorism could have been re-constructed as a 'crime' because the kind of sufferings was less intense compared to those of WWII.

Analysing Al-Qaeda's 'Constructivist Turn'

Next, let's consider the 'constructivist turn' of al-Qaeda, a terrorist group that falls within the definition of a constructivist. Using the basic tenets of constructivism, such as 'ideas, identities and norms,' Lynch (2006) says al-Qaeda has re-built its identity in the post 9/11 world. According to Lynch (2006), 'al-Qaeda's strategy seeks to promote an Islamic 'identity', define the 'interests' of all Muslims as necessarily in confrontation with the West, and shape the 'normative' environment in which Muslim politics are contested.' This is by far the most logical reason why one would assume constructivism considers such a transnational group with 'an ideological influence' to be an eligible actor in the political stage.

The fact that 'Islamists have a (widely unrecognized) constructivist theory of politics, in which ideas matter and persuasion is key' (Lynch, 2010), explains the motivation behind al-Qaeda's constructivist turn. It is no surprise why constructivism, 'a theory that emphasizes the role of ideologies, identities, persuasion, and transnational networks is (extremely) relevant to understanding the post-9/11 world.' (Snyder, 2004)

It is therefore the failure of the Rationalists to understand this fundamental 'constructivist orientation' of al-Qaeda (Lynch, 2006) that has led them to come up with a state-centric analysis on WoT. For instance, Realism which focuses on great powers and their relations, has very little to contribute about al-Qaeda, a transnational actor. A neo-Realist will argue from the point of view of United States as the main target of the terrorist. The WoT will be simply viewed as 'a unipolar power structure in operation.' (Buzan, 2002)

On the other hand, 'constructivists do not have a general picture of the world to be challenged by 9/11.' According to constructivist beliefs, 'the human universe does not exist independent of the ideas of the people involved in it. Though constructivism offers no picture of what the world is like, it pushes enquiry into the processes by which humans construct understandings.'(Buzan, 2002)

Since al-Qaeda lost its operational base in Afghan in 2001, it began to take a 'constructivist identity.' Since then, al-Qaeda has no actual territorial base. Just like how constructivists have no picture of the world, al-Qaeda has no territorial picture of its own. Rather it allows state-actors to construct it for themselves. In this 'constructivist terrain,' the transnational terrorist group no longer exists in any physical sense, although it exists virtually, and the picture of al-Qaeda is based on the 'social constructions' made about it (Lynch, 2006). Al-Qaeda is actually fighting the West, and the rest of the world, 'using media as a weapon,' conscious of its ability to manipulate social constructions of terrorism.

As Lynch (2006) has argued, 'al-Qaeda's constructivism derives both from structural factors – absence of a territorial base, a globalized field of contention shaped by the new media and information technologies – and Islamist ideas themselves.' In fact, al-Qaeda is 'the first guerrilla movement in history' which exists only 'virtually.' This 'complex organization' which is 'halfway between a sect and medieval military order' (Pisani, 2002) can be best understood by its social dimensions.

The functioning of al-Qaeda perfectly fits into Wendt's (1999) thought process, who believes, 'social threats are constructed, not natural.' From a constructivist lens, 'states create their own security dilemmas and competitions by interacting in particular ways.' The 'balance-of-threat' logic – the constructivist reformulation of the balance of power principle, explains the security dilemma between states. Walt (1987) says states engage in a balancing game. They 'ally to balance against threats rather than power alone.'

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Constructivists believe that 'states will act differently to friends and enemies,' based on their 'threat perceptions.' Their behaviours will be 'shaped by their shared understanding and collective knowledge of the self and the other.' They consider that 'shared identity decreases threat perception' (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007). This noticeably explains why USA insists on collaborations.

Looking at how constructivists interpret the WoT clarifies that terrorism fits into the constructivist framework. Moving away from an 'emphasis on states,' constructivists claim that the West reacted to al-Qaeda solely based on 'how al-Qaeda was socially constructed by them.' Naturally, their policies were not based how the rest of the world perceives al-Qaeda to be. (Hulsse & Spencer, 2007) A constructivist approach to the WoT will explore how the West constructed the 'identities and actions' of al-Qaeda and analyze the 'identity construction' through a process of 'interaction' between the state and the non-state actor.

Constructivist Understanding of Counter-Terrorism

The counter terrorism policies of Germany and Japan, for instance were markedly different from that of USA, their close ally. For the United States, the 9/11 attack was constructed as 'a war' against the West, for which the Bush government considered a military response as the most suitable one. The Germans at first assisted them, realizing the importance of 'international collaboration.' After the London and Madrid bombings, the Germans thought 'war' was not the right way of responding to terrorism. They opposed the US policy of broadening the WoT. (Katzenstein, 2003) Whereas, it was only seen as 'a major crisis event' by the Japanese, for which they offered symbolic support. Their response was not as intense as that of the Germans. As constructivists explain, these changes reflect 'past institutionalized practices and different conceptions of self and the other.' (Katzenstein, 2003)

But, why did Germany support the West initially and withdraw afterwards? Why did Germany and Japan react differently to the WoT? On 9/11, the United States suffered immense losses in a day. Neither did Japan nor Germany suffer from such severe terrorist attacks. USA came up with a military response, because 'the terrorist threat came from outside,' whereas for Japan or Germany, 'the threat came from inside,' which did not urge them to wage a war. (Katzenstein, 2003)

Metaphoric constructions come in handy whilst understanding counter terrorism policies. The rationale behind the change in Germany's stand on WoT was 'the shift in metaphors attached to al-Qaeda in a German tabloid newspaper.' (Hulsse & Spencer, 2008) Germany, which initially took a 'military' approach shifted to a criminal approach, after Madrid and London bombings. The change in the construction of terrorism 'from a military to a criminal threat' contributed to the policy change. Further, the extent of threat inflation made by the Germans is reflected in their counter terrorism policy.

Over the years, the US policy on WoT, from Bush to Obama, has not changed much, except for 'slight tactical adjustments.' A constructivist investigation into the US counter-terrorism policy by Jackson (2011) suggests that Obama's recent proposals still accept the original account on WoT, albeit with some dissimilarities in 'strategic direction' such as 'the decision to ban torture as a tool for interrogation; to close the Guantanamo Bay detention centre; and to withdraw US troops from Iraq.'

Constructivism is a cultural theory, explained by the different cultures of anarchy such as Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian. All of these are constructed by states, based on 'representations of enmity, rivalry and friend' developed through interactions (Wendt, 1999). Constructivists firmly believe that the WoT discourse is deeply infused with cultural understandings of the social world, which clearly explains the stark dissimilarities in German or Japanese counter terrorism policies, in home and abroad, and the changes (or the absence of it) in the US counter-terrorism policies.

Conclusion

Constructivism certainly has an edge over other traditional approaches. Terrorism, being a 'social problem that can't exist independent of the ideas of people involved in it,' wholly lends itself to constructivist understandings. Not

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focusing on the 'material damage' caused by terrorism, they view it from a 'fear' perspective. This gets them closer to the issue.

However, what if a 'constructivist' analysis in erroneous? What if wrong constructions lead to faulty policies? Do constructivists take any responsibilities at all? Reviewing core terrorism studies, Jackson (2007) clarifies that constructivism is not here 'to establish the "correct" or "real truth" of terrorism; rather, its aim is to destabilise dominant interpretations,' ruling out these 'what if' questions.

The value added by constructivists to WoT discourse is multi-fold. Firstly, constructivists' 'identity construction' helps create diverse notions of terrorism. Secondly, their understanding of 'the self and the other' explains the rationale behind state responses to terrorism. Further, disclosing the ever-changing nature of ideas and identities, constructivists defend changing responses to terrorism. Emphasizing on how interactions shape relationships, constructivism authenticates state responses through its 'cultural' lens.

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