

# The Popularity of the 'New Terrorism' Discourse

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### The Popularity of 'New Terrorism' Discourse: A Case of Political Interest and Psychology

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of April, 2011, a bomb killed 17 people in a Marrakech café. In the initial hours after the attack, it was not officially known if it was a terrorist attack or, if it was, who was responsible. Yet despite the immediate lack of information and clear statements from the Moroccan government regarding the unknown, international media freely stated speculation as fact. Even the earliest reports condemned the attack as the work of a terrorist, reported that it was certainly a suicide bomber and it was widely reported that a group claiming to be the Islamic Maghreb al-Qaeda organization had taken responsibility for the attack in a YouTube video. Ultimately, these claims all turned out to be either false or disputed. Perhaps, however, in the age of the so-called 'new terrorism' the details don't matter as much as the vague, omnipresent threat of encroaching Islamists. Because of this 'new terrorism' we must assume the worst and not leave anything to chance. We should be as fearful and cautious as possible. We should defend our way of life against the menacing other.

At least that is the sentiment reflected by government policy and popular discourse. Contrary to this popularly accepted position, a critical approach to terrorism studies argues that there really is no 'new terrorism,' despite the fact that the notion of a kind of terrorism substantially different from that which exists in history books is widely believed and reinforced. Furthermore, the reasons behind this mass popularity of 'new terrorism' fall into two main categories. These categories can be called political/governmental interests and the psychology of the masses.

### New Terrorism vs. Old Terrorism

The opening sentence of a textbook on terrorism states, "Terrorism has been a dark feature of human behavior since the dawn of recorded history" (Martin, 2010, 3). If this is the case, what makes the 'new terrorism' different from the old? According to the mainstream orthodoxy on terrorism, the old terrorism was generally characterized by: left wing ideology; the use of small scale, conventional weapons; clearly identifiable organizations or movements with equally clear political and social messages; specific selection of targets and "explicit grievances championing specific classes or ethnonational groups" (Martin, 2010, 28).

Also according to the orthodoxy, the shift to the new terrorism, on the other hand, is thought to have emerged in the early 1990s (Jackson, 2011) and took root in mass consciousness with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. (Martin, 2010, 3). The new terrorism is characterized by: "loose, cell-based networks with minimal lines of command and control," "desired acquisition of high-intensity weapons and weapons of mass destruction" (Martin, 2010, 27), "motivated by religious fanaticism rather than political ideology and it is aimed at causing mass causality and maximum destruction" (Jackson, 2007, 179-180).

However, these dichotomous definitions of the old and new types of terrorism are not without problems. The first major problem is that terrorism has been characterized by the same fundamental qualities throughout history. Some of the superficial characteristics, the means of implementation (e.g. the invention of the Internet or dynamite) or the discourse (communism vs. Islam) may have evolved, but the central components remain the same. The second major problem is that the characterization of new terrorism is, at best, rooted in a particular political ideology, biased and inaccurate. At worst, it is racist, promotes war mongering and has contributed to millions of deaths. As David

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Rapoport states:

Many contemporary studies begin ... by stating that although terrorism has always been a feature of social existence, it became 'significant' ... when it 'increased in frequency' and took on 'novel dimensions' as an international or transnational activity, creating in the process a new 'mode of conflict' (1984, 658).

Isabelle Duyvesteyn points out that this would indicate evidence for the emergence of a new type of terrorism, if it were not for the fact that the article was written in 1984 and described a situation from the 1960s (Duyvesteyn, 2004, 439). It seems that there have been many new phases of terrorism over the years. So many so that the definition of 'new' has been stretched significantly and applied relatively across decades. Nevertheless, the idea that *this* terrorism, that which the War on Terror (WoT) is directed against, is the most significant and unique form of terrorism that has taken hold in the popular and political discourse. Therefore, it is useful to address each of the so-called new characteristics in turn.

The first characteristic is the idea that new terrorism is based on loosely organized cell-based networks as opposed to the traditional terrorist groups, which were highly localized and hierarchical in nature. An oft-cited example of a traditional terrorist group is the Irish Republican Army (IRA), who operated under a military structure and in a relatively (in contrast to the perceived transnational operations of al-Qaeda) localized capacity. However, some of the first modern terrorists were not highly organized groups but small fragmented groups of anarchists. These groups were heeding the call of revolutionary anarchist Mikhail Bakunin and other contemporary anarchists to achieve anarchism, collectivism and atheism via violent means (Morgan, 2001, 33). Despite the initial, self-described "amorphous" nature of these groups, they were a key force in the Russian Revolution (Maximoff, G.). Furthermore, leading anarchist philosophers of the Russian Revolution argued that terrorists "should organize themselves into small groups, or cells" (Martin, 2010, 217). These small groups cropped up all around Russia and Europe in subsequent years and formed an early form of a "loosely organized cell-based network" not unlike modern day al Qaeda. Duyvesteyn further notes that both the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was founded in 1964, and Hezbollah, founded 1982, operate on a network structure with very little central control over groups (2004, 444).

The second problematic idea of new terrorism is that contemporary terrorist groups aim to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). This belief is simply not supported by empirical evidence. One of the key problems with this theory is that WMDs are significantly more difficult to obtain and utilize than most people understand. Even if a terrorist group were to obtain a biological WMD, "Biologist Matthew Meselson calculates that it would take a ton of nerve gas or five tons of mustard gas to produce heavy casualties among unprotected people in an open area of one square kilometer" (Mueller, 2005, 488). And that's only an example of the problem with the implementation of WMDs, assuming they are acquired, transported and desirable by a terrorist group in the first place. Additional problems, such as the fact that WMDs "are extremely difficult to deploy and control" (Mueller, 2005, 488) and that making a bomb "is an extraordinarily difficult task" (Mueller, 2005, 489), further diminish the risk. It is interesting to note that, while the potential dangers of WMDs are much lauded, the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> were low tech and had been technologically possible for more than 100 years. Mueller also states, "although nuclear weapons have been around for well over half a century, no state has ever given another state (much less a terrorist group) a nuclear weapon that the recipient could use independently" (2005, 490).

All of this talk about the difficulty of acquiring and deploying WMDs (by non-state agents), is not to diminish the question of what terrorists have to gain by utilizing these weapons. It is important to question whether it would even further the aims of terrorists to use WMDs. The evidence suggests otherwise. In the "Politics of Fear" Jackson states, "Mass casualties are most often counterproductive to terrorist aims – they alienate their supporters and can provoke harsh reprisals from the authorities [...]" in addition, "[...] they would undermine community support, distort the terrorist's political message, and invite over-whelming retaliation" (2007, 196-197). Despite popular rhetoric to the contrary, terrorists are "rational political actors and are acutely aware of these dangers" (Jackson, 2007, 197). Government appointed studies on this issue have supported these views.

This leads us to the third problem with new terrorism, which is the idea that we are facing a new era of terrorism motivated by religious fanaticism rather than political ideology. As stated previously, earlier, so-called traditional

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forms of terrorism are associated with left wing, political ideology, whereas contemporary terrorists are described as having "anti-modern goals of returning society to an idealized version of the past and are therefore necessarily anti-democratic, anti-progressive and, by implication, irrational" (Gunning and Jackson, 3). Rapoport argues the idea that religious terrorists are irrational, saying, "what seems to be distinctive about modern [religious] terrorists, their belief that terror can be organized rationally, represents or distorts a major theme peculiar to our own culture [...]" (1984, 660). Conveniently for the interests of the political elites, as we shall see later, the idea of irrational fanaticism makes the notion of negotiation and listening to the demands of the other impossible. In light of this, it is interesting to note that the U.S. has, for decades, given billions of dollars in aid to the State of Israel, which could be argued to be a fundamentalist, religious organization that engages in the terrorization of a group of people. Further, it is difficult to speak of The Troubles in Northern Ireland without speaking of the religious conflict, yet it was never assumed that the IRA was "absolutist, inflexible, unrealistic, lacking in political pragmatism, and not amenable to negotiation" (Gunning and Jackson, 4). Rapoport further reinforces the idea that religious terrorism goes back centuries by saying, "Before the nineteenth century, religion provided the only acceptable justifications for terror..." (1984, 659).

As we have seen here, problems with the discourse of new terrorism include the fact that these elements of terrorism are neither new nor are the popular beliefs of the discourse supported by empirical evidence. The question remains, then, why is the idea of new terrorism so popular? This question will be addressed next.

## Political Investment in New Terrorism

There are two main categories that explain the popularity of new terrorism. The first category is government and political investment in the propagation of the idea that a distinct, historically unknown type of terrorism exists. The mainstream discourse [1] reinforces, through statements by political elites, media, entertainment and every other way imaginable, the culture of violence, militarism and feelings of fear. Through mass media, cultural norms and the integration of neoliberal ideology into society, people are becoming increasingly desensitized to human rights issues, war, social justice and social welfare, not to mention apathetic to the political process in general.

The discourse of the WoT is merely the contemporary incarnation of this culture of fear and violence. In the past, various threats have included American Indians, women, African Americans, communists, HIV/AIDS and drugs, to name but a few (Campbell, 1992). It can be argued that there are four main political functions of terrorism discourse. The first is as a distraction from other, more immediate and domestic social problems such as poverty, employment, racial inequality, health and the environment. The second, more sinister function is to control dissent. In looking at both of these issues Jackson states:

There are a number of clear political advantages to be gained from the creation of social anxiety and moral panics. In the first place, fear is a disciplining agent and can be effectively deployed to de-legitimise dissent, mute criticism, and constrain internal opponents. [...] Either way, its primary function is to ease the pressures of accountability for political elites. As instrument of elite rule, political fear is in effect a political project aimed at reifying existing structures of power. (Politics of Fear, 2007, 185).

Giroux further reinforces the idea that a culture of fear creates conformity and deflects attention from government accountability by saying, "the ongoing appeal to jingoistic forms of patriotism divert the public from addressing a number of pressing domestic and foreign issues; it also contributes to the increasing suppression of dissent" (2003, 5).

Having a problem that is "ubiquitous, catastrophic, and fairly opaque" (Jackson, Politics of Fear, 2007, 185) is useful to political elites, because it is nearly impossible to address the efficacy of combating the problem. At least, empirical evaluation can be, and is, easily discouraged in academic circles through research funding directives. Domestic problems such as the unemployment rate or health care reform, on the other hand, are directly measurable and heavily monitored by domestic sources. It is possible to account for the success or failure of policies designed to address these types of problems and the (re)election of politicians often depends heavily on success in these areas. However, the public is neither involved on a participative level nor, often, socially aware of what is happening in murkier and unreachable areas like foreign policy.

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The third political investment in maintaining the terrorism discourse has to do with economics. "At a material level, there are a great many vested interests in maintaining the widespread condition of fear, not least for the military-industrial complex which benefits directly from increased spending on national security" (Jackson, *Politics of Fear*, 2007, 186). This is true with all forms of crime and insecurity as all of them factor into the greater security-industrial complex. Not only do these industries employ millions of people and support their families, they boost the economy. Barry Buzan talks of these the importance of these issues to both the government and the public in terms of a 'threat-deficit' – meaning that U.S. policy and society is dependent on having an external threat (Buzan, 2007, 1101).

The fourth key political interest in terrorism discourse is constructing a national identity. This will be discussed more thoroughly in the following section, however, it is important to acknowledge the role the WoT (and previous threats) has had on constructing and reinforcing a collective identity. Examples of this can be seen in the discourse and the subsequent reaction to anyone daring to step outside the parameters of the Bush Administration-established narrative in the days immediately following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. A number of journalists, teachers and university professors lost their jobs for daring to speak out in criticism of U.S. policy and actions following the attacks. In 2001, Lynne Cheney attacked the then deputy chancellor of the New York City Schools, Judith Rizzo, for saying "terrorist attacks demonstrated the importance of teaching about Muslim cultures" (Giroux, 2003, 22). According to Giroux, this form of jingoistic patriotism "becomes a euphemism for shutting down dissent, eliminating critical dialogue, and condemning critical citizenship in the interest of conformity and a dangerous departure from what it means to uphold a viable democracy" (2003, 24). The message is, we are not the other (Muslims), patriotism equals agreement and compliance and our identity is based on the shared values of liberty and justice.

According to Carol Winkler, "Negative ideographs contribute to our collective identity by branding behavior that is unacceptable ... American society defines itself as much by its opposition to tyranny and slavery as it does by a commitment to liberty" (Winkler, 2006, 12). Terrorism, and by association in this case, Islam, functions as a negative ideograph of American values. It thereby tells us what our values and our identity are by telling us who the enemy is and who we are not. According to Jackson, "[...] some have argued that Western identity is dependent on the appropriation of a backward, illiberal, violent Islamic 'other' against which the West can organize a collective liberal, civilized 'self' and consolidate its cultural and political norms" (Jackson, *Constructing Enemies*, 2007, 420).

Through this analysis we can see there are four key ways in which the hegemonic system is invested in propagating a culture of fear and violence and terrorism discourse. Not only is it key for political elites to support this system, it is also crucial that there be an ever renewing threat that is uniquely different from past threats. These new threats allow for the investment of significantly more resources, the continuation of the economy, the renewal of a strong sense of cultural identity and the indoctrination and obedience of new generations of society. This essay will now look at how individual and collective psychology supports the popularity of the new terrorism discourse.

## Psychology of the Masses

The second category of reasons why new terrorism discourse is popular can be called the psychology of the masses. There are a number of factors that fall under this category such as: the hyper-reality of the modern era; the culture of fear; the carryover of historical archetypes and the infiltration of neoliberal values into cultural norms. The topic of social and individual psychology and how it relates to the propagation and acceptance of hegemonic discourse is broad. It is also an important aspect of critical terrorism studies and merits further exploration. However, in this section will outline the basis for the popularity of new terrorism discourse and discuss several ways in which this popularity is manifested and reinforced in contemporary society.

Henry Giroux presents a promising hypothesis regarding the foundation of America's obsession with fear-based discourse and policy, such as that surrounding the WoT. He argues that, "The United States has a desperate, unfulfilled longing for community, steeped as it is in the ethic for neoliberalism with its attempts to subordinate all human needs to the dictates of the market and the bottom line [...]" (2003, 3). This focus on the monetary above the human is reflected on both the personal and the societal level. One of the things Americans long for most but prioritize least is community. Under the current economic model, it is the norm for people to spend the majority of their lives working at jobs that neither fulfill them nor leave them time for family and community. As they begin to near

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the end of their lives as economic contributors, they find they little to show for their efforts and even less of an idea as to what comes next. Because society emphasizes economic contribution and success, many people have to learn a new way of identifying themselves and their place in society. Because of the lack of community or social infrastructure, this process can be very difficult for some people.

It is also true that there are many other factors, historical and cultural, that makes American society fiercely individualistic. The combination of pervasive neoliberal cultural norms and individualism leave a gap in the social fabric that has historically been filled by fear. According to Giroux, "In such ruthless times any invocation of community seems nourishing, even when the term is invoked to demand an unconditional loyalty and treats everything short of such loyalty as an act of unforgivable treason" (2003, 3). However, in this context, community "demands not courage, dialogue, and responsibility, but silence and complicity" (Giroux, 2003, 4). In this regard, the political interest in perpetuating the culture of fear discussed above and the integration of neoliberal market principles into social values works hand in hand to break down society and rebuild it in a new, more dependent, apathetic and compliant manner.

Another reason why the discourse of new terrorism is so popular is that the media constantly and consistently reinforces it. In a study of the role of language in the WoT, Michele Milner found that conceptual frameworks such as patriarchy, national security and terrorism are reinforced by their use by officials and their representation in the media (Milner, 2010, 177). Much in the same way realism came to define the workings of international relations, the hegemonic system creates the definitions of terms and ideas by using them. Their use gives them legitimacy and then they are sold to the public as objective truths that can be known by empirical study. The public is then inundated with these 'truths' through every means possible. Violence and stereotypes reflect the cultural anxieties that have blossomed out of the culture of fear and, thus, it is what sells. The media has created a visual representation of the discourse of the war on terror and, not surprisingly, it reflects western, rather neo-conservative, politics and ideology. As an average citizen and consumer, it is nearly impossible to escape this discourse.

Further complicating the terrorism discourse for the average person is the fact that we now live in a hyper-reality. Very real images of destruction, death and torture have come to be part of our daily lives. At this point, most people have become both desensitized to the violence and dissociated from the reality. Jackson sums up this disconnection by saying:

For many Americans, the sense that what they were seeing [on September 11<sup>th</sup>] was a movie, but that it was even more 'real' than a movie, was a genuine concern ...the spectacle of the attacks fractured the common rhetorical resources of a society raised on a steady diet of virtual violence (2005, 150).

Because of this hyper-reality, society is primed to accept the orthodox discourse that is produced by mainstream media and political elites alike. If officials say that the threat is new, that message is reflected and reinforced by the media enough for it to become true.

The last factor I will discuss here regarding the acceptance and popularity of terrorism discourse is the perpetuation of historical archetypes. This idea, initially introduced by Robin Morgan in the late 1980s, provides a different perspective on the prevalence of the terrorist image in popular culture. Morgan argues that the image we have of the terrorist is nothing new nor has it only recently come to occupy a place in society. The terrorist, while being a very real person, is nothing more than the contemporary manifestation of the historical archetype of the hero. This archetype has been found in societies since ancient times, including ancient Greek, Babylonian, Egyptian, Hindu and Nordic societies to name but a few. Morgan boldly declares the terrorist to be "the technological-age manifestation of the hero" (Morgan, 2001, 54).

Controversially, Morgan compares and contrasts the stories of great mythical figures such as Jesus, Buddha and Heracles with the story of the terrorist and finds them to follow the same developmental lines. She states that the hero has "more or less a single profile, which varies in minor detail but remains substantially the same from culture to culture" (Morgan, 2001, 62). The characteristics of the hero in this profile are: that he is fatherless or claims a mysterious god as a father; he is noble at birth but lives in poverty as a youth; he is highly educated; he has a calling

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to "save or avenge his family, clan or people"; he is aware that he faces an early death if he pursues his heroic destiny but fearlessly pursues it anyway and the "land is purified by his blood" (Morgan, 2001, 62). Duyvesteyn cites a study conducted between 1976 and 1986 that showed that the average terrorist profile is someone in young adulthood, educated and middle to upper class (Duyvesteyn, 2004, 441). Citing the same 1977 study by Miller and Russell, Morgan summarizes (though clearly taking substantial poetic license):

It [the profile] is primarily of someone male, young of "good" family, educated and cultured and skilled, showing precocity and accomplishment, uprooted and experientially mobile due to a period of upheaval, enflamed by the situation, and possessed by the suffering of the people. He is idealistic, brave and self-disciplined, yet can find no way out of guilt, grief, and impotence until he encounters his mentor/leader/god... (2001, 67).

The comparison is an interesting one. It also strikes me from watching a number of independent films showing non-mainstream perspectives of terrorism in the Middle East (recently, *Paradise Now* and *Miral*, among others), that Morgan's profile of the hero-terrorist is uncannily accurate in that context.

However controversial and subject to criticism Morgan's analysis of the terrorist as hero archetypes may be, it merits consideration that the image and idea of the terrorist has played an important role in nearly all cultural mythologies. Though not something often (or ever) considered by those who write the political histories, mythologies and archetypes have a significant place in the history of humanity. They are key to our identities and they help shape the development of cultural values, societies and governments. After all, the influence of Greek and Roman philosophy on the modern western judicial system is unquestionable and the influence of Christianity (and Islam, Hinduism, etc. as relevant) on contemporary society is paramount as well. All of these influences themselves come out of mythology. As I said previously, the connection is an interesting one and warrants further investigation. It is certainly plausible that one of the reasons the idea of terrorism and the new terrorism discourse is so widely embraced and espoused in popular culture is that it fits a niche that has always been there. It is merely the new manifestation of a very old concept.

## Conclusion

According to former Vice President of the U.S., Richard Cheney, the West is facing terrorists who are "willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to kill millions of others" (cited in Jackson, 2007, *Politics of Fear*, 180). Sadly, Mr. Cheney is not the only one espousing this fearful rhetoric and since September 11, 2001, the idea that there is a new terrorism, more terrible and deadly than ever before, has become part of the standard discourse. However, through this paper I have attempted to show that not only is there actually nothing new about contemporary terrorism but that the evidence disputes the accuracy of the characteristics applied to the new terrorism. It is crucial that the public be willing to critically examine what is behind the discourse, because the discourse of the WoT has had a profoundly negative impact on the world in the last ten years. Perhaps if people were able to understand that we are not dealing with anything different from what we have been dealing with for hundreds of years and that the statistics simply do not support the claims made about the dangers and risk of terrorism, the field would be opened for new conversations about security – conversations that address broader security concerns, do not involve trillion dollar budgets and that move us toward potentially more efficacious solutions.

However, this is a lofty undertaking precisely because of the widespread acceptance and functionality of the terrorism discourse in western society. I argue that the discourse serves four key purposes for the political elites and that it is thoroughly integrated into the psychology of both individuals and societies through historical context; the representation and reinforcement of the media and the emptiness of life in modern, neoliberal culture. All of these elements add up to make mainstream discourse something that is part and parcel of contemporary society. Powerful structures are in place to disseminate the discourse and to reinforce it so thoroughly that it becomes truth. I do not have any answers as to how to overcome this issue, however, deconstructing the discourse, by those who recognize it, is a significant first step.

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[1] I refer primarily to U.S. society, culture and psychology here because it seems one of the most efficient ways for political policy and ideology to spread globally is to infuse it into the national culture. As culture may arguably be the United States' biggest export, instilling an ideology into the American psychology not only maintains conformity and obedience at home but it effectively spreads the ideology to the world.

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