Does terrorism pose a real threat to security?

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ALEX WILSON, NOV 22 2010

Terrorism is undoubtedly an issue at the forefront of security concerns, especially in the west as a result of the 9/11 attacks. However, terrorism is not a new concern, it has merely become more prominent due to the relatively recent attacks on the west and the resulting conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet agreements on the definition of terrorism, and indeed security, vary as does opinion on the nature of the threat from terrorism. Indeed, as Reich (1991) argues, terrorism is complex and diverse, as are those who engage in it[1]. As such, we must first articulate a basic definition of terrorism and security in order to ascertain whether terrorism is indeed a threat. Additionally, the notion of security takes many forms, and it is dependant on what is labelled the referent object as to whether terrorism can be viewed as a threat; the referent object being "the thing to secure"[2] (whether this be the state, the population etc). The aim of this essay is to provide, at the very least, a basic definition of terrorism and its nature in order to conclude whether it is indeed a threat. In order to reach a conclusion, an examination of security and the different forms it takes is also essential; which will also lead to an examination of 'securitization'. Ultimately, the threat from terrorism will vary from actor to actor dependant on their experiences and role in the international system.

As mentioned, an agreement on a definition of the term 'terrorism' is often hard to reach, as it is dependent on individual view points and belief systems as well as experiences. However, a definition has to be agreed on in order to address the essay question. Lutz et al. (2005) provide a relatively simple definition that can be built upon:

Terrorism involves (1) the use of violence or threat of violence (2) by an organized group (3) to achieve political objectives…directed against a target audience…who are often innocent civilians…it is considered an act of terrorism only if one or both actors is not a government. Finally, (6) terrorism is a weapon of the weak[3]

Yet even this relatively simplistic definition has its shortcomings. Who is innocent? Are politicians, for instance, innocent?[4] This of course depends on ones viewpoint and experiences. Terrorism also falls under either 'state sponsored terrorism' or 'new terrorism', which is seen as supra-national and indiscriminate in carrying out attacks. Additionally, Peter Sederberg argues that terrorism can be placed into three separate categories; a military issue, a criminal issue or it can be seen as a disease to be eradicated[5]. However, Colin Gray (2006) argues that:

Governments must treat terrorists as criminals because the conflict is very much about the respective legitimacy of the two sides in the eyes of society[6]

Evidently, views on the definition and categorisation of the term 'terrorism' vary greatly. However, as Lloyd Pettiford (2003) argues:

Concentrating on the deliberate killing of innocent civilians, by whomever and whenever, allows us to be clear about what is terrorism without becoming confused by political justifications[7]

Again, this appears to be a somewhat simplistic view, yet as emphasised, a definition has to be agreed on in order to assess the threat terrorism poses. Subsequently, this will be the view of terrorism adopted for the purpose of examining the essay question. As with terrorism, an agreement on what constitutes 'security' is also often hard to reach. As outlined, it is dependent on what is perceived to be the referent object. The Copenhagen School of thought (led by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde) argue that threats are dependent on the referent object and as

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such, the 'securitizing actor', which is defined as:

…actors who securitize issues by declaring something, a referent object, existentially threatened[8]

What is threatened is dependent on the viewpoint of the 'securitizing actor'. Buzan et al. (1998) argue that securitizing actors can be political leaders and governments as well as bureaucracies, lobbyists and pressure groups[9] . The Copenhagen School also argues that:

Referent objects can be…(military security)… (political security); …(economic security)… (societal security)… (environmental security)[10]

The Copenhagen School represent a move away from a primary focus on state security towards a consideration of non-military security issues. However, as the view of security broadens, it could be argued that its meaning becomes less coherent. The Copenhagen school aims to address this issue with its 'securitization model'. An issue is securitized when:

…it requires emergency actions beyond the state's standard political procedures[11]

The action of securitization can essentially label the issue as beyond standard practice. Extraordinary measures can be imposed (but do not have to be) because of the urgency of the existential threat to security.[12] Integral to the process of securitization is the 'speech act', which can be described as a securitizing actor using:

…language to articulate a problem in security terms and to persuade a relevant audience of its immediate danger[13]

The 'speech act' aims to convince the necessary groups and individuals that extraordinary measures are required. An example of this would be the language used by the then U.S President, George Bush when he described the 'axis of evil' in his 2002 State of the Union address; and this attitude eventually led to the war in Iraq[14]. Evidently, governments and political elites are able to implement the securitization process relatively easily compared to non-state actors. Yet trade unions etc can still implement the process of securitization, at least in the initial stages. Additionally, security concerns will arguably vary from democratic to authoritarian states, where the military and political elites play a greater part in the process and the wider population is often excluded. The Copenhagen School sees security as being socially constructed concept and, as such, reinforces the point of this essay, that what constitutes a threat is relative[15]. However, it most also be noted that issues may be securitized in order to generate support for them or to mobilise resources swiftly. This argument can also be applied to security concerns over terrorism. As Alan Collins (2007) argues:

With the growing articulation of issues as threats in a post-9/11context, an act of securitization can lead to the further legitimization of the armed forces in politics as well as to the curbing of civil liberties in the name of security…[16]

Evidently, examples such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan support this point, as does the increase in anti-terror laws and measures. Security, as outlined, is dependent on what is deemed to be an issue worth securitizing as well as what is perceived to be the referent object. Referent objects can vary from the state, to the population or the environment to name but three concerns, as can the securitizing actor. A criticism of the Copenhagen School (specifically the securitization model) is that it fails to explain traditional state centric security concerns any better than the realist perspective. As John Baylis et. al (2005) argue:

…there is a major disagreement about whether the main focus of enquiry should be on 'individual', 'national', or 'international' security.[17]

As such, I will analyse a selection of main security concerns in order to ascertain whether terrorism is indeed a threat to security; beginning with national security. Barry Buzan (1983) argues that:

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In the case of security, the discussion is about the pursuit of freedom from threat…security is about the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity[18]

Arguably, if we take the example of the West, we do not have freedom from threat, as the recent terror attacks show. Furthermore, the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, recently argued that:

We still face a real and serious threat to the UK from international terrorism…[19]

This view came after the raising of the terrorist threat level by the Home Office and the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC). We must remember that the threat of terrorism is not a new phenomenon. For example, the threat of Irish Republican terrorism has been a long-standing one; arguably it still poses a threat today. However, since the 9/11 attacks, the threat of terrorism has become much more 'real' as it is covered extensively in the media; the attacks are beginning to claim more lives and perhaps most significantly, the West (specifically the U.S) has launched a 'war on terror'. This means that 'terrorism' is constantly in the public domain, and as such, is very difficult to argue that terrorism is not a threat to the state. In the case of the U.K, there has been a focus on anti-terror laws such as the detention of terror suspects for up to 28 days[20] and the United States face continuing criticism over the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. These measures would suggest that the governments of the Western World perceive terrorism to be a real and present threat to national security.

However, is terrorism as much of a threat as it is perceived to be? The 4th U.N Survey of Crime Trends (1994) listed organised crime as a higher concern than terrorism. Arguably this survey was carried out before the 9/11 attacks, so terrorism is almost certainly accepted as a higher concern now. However, if we take the case of the U.K, the 2002 update to the Strategic Defence Review (1998) outlined that Britain needed to maintain a focus on maritime and expeditionary capabilities. The update also argued that the U.K needed to maintain its position as a global player through the construction of aircraft carriers and the renewal of the 'Trident' nuclear deterrent. This kind of action is typical of the neo-realist perspective that states exist in an anarchic 'self help' system[21] which, in turn, leads to a security dilemma and the military competition of states[22]. This focus on traditional military capability and security would suggest the terrorism is perhaps not as big a threat to the state as actors such as the media would have us believe.

Undoubtedly, human security must also be considered in conjunction with state security, as the populous makes the state. Human security, however, is seen as a non-traditional security concern under a 'broad church' of security. 'People' are seen as the referent object and the concept is that:

…people ought to be secure in the conduct of their daily lives[23]

Evidently, terrorism is a threat to human security as people (specifically innocent civilians) are the target of terrorism. Terrorist attacks afflict people during the daily conduct of their lives, as was the case with the 9/11 and 7/7 terror attacks to name but two examples. The same can be said for the Madrid train bombings:

On 11 March 2004, a series of bombs exploded within minutes of each other on four commuter trains in the Spanish capital Madrid.[24]

Arguably, human security should be the main focus when considering the risk of terrorism. As outlined, terrorists target innocent civilians, which consequently means people are threatened during the conduct of their daily lives. The U.S State Department claimed that over 20 000 people were killed in terrorist attacks in 2006.[25] Yet, as previously mentioned, this figure is relative. It depends on who is collating the figures, and what they define as terrorist action. What about the deaths of innocent civilians caused by U.S military action in Iraq for example; undoubtedly some groups would include these deaths in the figure. Terrorism, however, still inarguably threatens human security. However, as outlined, terrorism may still not be the prominent threat to security in comparison to more pressing issues. For example, Pauline Kerr (Alan Collins et al. 2007) argues that:

…the main perpetrator of violence against civilians is frequently the ruling regime and state actors such as the police

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and the military[26]

This is not a concern we in the West have to live with, yet this example returns to the point that each state or actor is different, as are the security concerns they identify. An example to further reinforce this point is the recent earthquake in Haiti. Hundreds of thousands were killed and at least three million people affected[27]. This natural disaster links with the concept of environmental security; which has a multiple of interpretations. It is a concept of security rather than a referent object and as such, can be applied to different security concerns[28]. In relation to human security however, the environment can affect the welfare of individuals in a variety of ways. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP 1994) defines human security concerns as being (in addition to environmental security):

…*economic, food, health, personal, community, and political security***[29]**

It is evident that a disaster such as the Haiti earthquake can affect all of these issues. The infrastructure of the country was destroyed as was the weak government. This in turn led to health and food issues to name but two concerns. Evidently there are greater threats to security than terrorism, especially if you live in a Third World nation. Yet, it must be remembered that a major natural disaster also has the potential to threaten even the most established state, yet some are more at risk to this threat than others. Terrorism may not directly pose a threat to environmental concerns, but this does not mean terrorism cannot stem from non-traditional security concerns, such as the environment or the economy. For example, the civil war in Somalia has resulted in agricultural disruption and consequently famine as competition for resources rages. The government and economy of Somalia have collapsed, and as Paul Collier (2008) argues:

*Once a war has begun, the economic damage undoes the growth achieved during peace. Worse, even aside from this economic damage the risk of further war explodes upward.***[30]**

This is what Collier describes as the 'conflict trap'. Non-traditional security issues can create instability which in turn leads to occurrences such as civil war which creates further insecurity. These states, as we have seen with Somalia, can then become a terrorist haven and recruiting ground.

In conclusion, the terms 'terrorism' and 'security' are relative depending on the actor and their view point and experiences. We can agree that terrorism is, on a very basic level, the targeting of innocent civilians. A definition of 'security' is dependent on what is labelled the 'referent object', which, as discussed, is dependent on the securitizing actor and the speech act. As we have seen, issues can be securitized to enable extraordinary measures to be adopted; an example of which was George Bush's 'axis of evil' speech and the subsequent invasion of Iraq. However, terrorism is undoubtedly a threat to human security as the populous is the target of terrorism. As is the case with national security, we are not free from threat, yet the threat may not be as high as perceived; there are arguably more significant threats to security. Non-traditional security threats can also result in greater insecurity and terrorism.

Ultimately, terrorism is a threat to the security of some actors more than others, dependant on their views, vulnerability, concerns and policies.

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