

Shaping Terrorist Identity: The Case of Dawood Ibrahim

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DHEERAJ P. C., APR 5 2018

Every individual's identity is influenced and shaped by historical, societal and cultural factors. The identity of a terrorist is no exception to this rule. In this article, I use the case of Dawood Ibrahim, a specially designated global terrorist, and his participation in the 1993 Bombay blasts as an illustration to examine the determining factors of a terrorist in South Asia. The 1993 Bombay blasts, a series of bomb blasts in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai), were orchestrated, according to clear-cut evidence, by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan in cahoots with the men of Dawood's gang. The principal factors observed in this article that helped develop Dawood's identity as a global terrorist are categorised as intrinsic, atmospheric and extraneous. Today, Dawood is a wanted fugitive, by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Interpol, for a list of crimes including murder, extortion, drug-trafficking, terrorism and others. But, during 1993, the situation was starkly different and the tri-factorial narrative offered in this article helps put to rest some of the determinants of a terrorist's identity, particularly in South Asia.

Intrinsic Factor: Dawood's Voluntary Drift into Terrorism

Bombay, between the 1950s and mid-1990s, was a shining coastal city in an impoverished India, for it epitomised the dire state of the Indian economy on the one hand and was home for some of the most affluent on the other. Among the rich and successful were many who had profited from criminal and illegal activities. The presence of the docks and several entry points on the coastline had provided an effective conduit for smuggling of illicit goods that essentially metamorphosed into an organised nexus between criminal syndicates and corrupt law-enforcement officials. The fact that the city was characterised by high poverty rate and the government's economic policies had little impact, if any, on elevating the status of the poor guaranteed that the Mafia kings could substitute the government in certain areas and control the population. In return, these masses had offered legitimacy to these dons as well as work force to their criminal activities. The kickbacks were high, and everybody went home happy at the end of the day. It was amidst such an environment that Dawood Ibrahim would grow.

There was an intrinsic lure for money among the impoverished youth of Bombay, like Dawood, who sought refuge in the bludgeoning competition in the city's underworld and criminal syndicates. Thus, was born the "D-Company", which from the 1970s was involved in criminal, smuggling and trafficking activities. However, it is interesting to note that the previous doyens of the Bombay underworld had not indulged in smuggling of goods that contributed to terrorism or in any way harmed human life directly. Here, the urge to make money facilitated Dawood's drift towards narcotics and illegal arms trafficking that were used to sponsor terror activities. Under this pretext, it is possible that the opportunity presented by the ISI during 1992-3 was quickly encashed upon by Dawood. The unholy alliance between the two has continued to this day and the narcotics network —popularly known as the Golden Crescent— controlled by the duo has spread its tentacles across the globe.

In popular terrorism studies, the intrinsic factor falls under the psychological approach to the study of terrorism. The proponents of the psychological approach rely on the explanations of abnormality and other peculiar psychological traits of a terrorist resulting out of bad past experiences. With such innate factors, argue these theorists, that a terrorist is driven to terrorism on the basis of irrationality. Dawood's case debunks this argument and highlights that the penchant for money-making, that was intrinsic to the extent that it was shaped by past experiences, allowed him to make a rational decision to choose a path that ensured lucrative opportunities for the future, especially when it had the backing of the Pakistani state.

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Atmospheric Factor: Communal Politics and Societal Fault lines

The 1993 Bombay blasts, despite being a manifestation of a long and comprehensive plan charted by the ISI to foment terrorism in Indian cities to target India's economic growth, was embraced by Dawood for one strong reason—justice to his Muslim brethren. The incident was preceded by two episodes of communal riots between Hindus and Muslims that had shook the city. Towards the end of the violent phase, when peace had finally prevailed, it was observed that many Muslims who had lost members of their friends and family reached out to Dawood for justice/vengeance. It must be remembered here that the mafia kings had a godfather image in the society, especially within the community they represented. It is reported that the atmospheric pressures were so high in the aftermath of the communal riots that Dawood used to receive couriers containing broken bangles (symbol of a widow in South Asian culture) with condemning messages like "A brother who cannot protect the chastity of his sister deserves this gift".

Dawood's associates of that time have also reported of severe emotional turmoil ensuing in his life as a result of receiving such letters. Hence, there was a sentimental factor driving Dawood to serve justice to his Muslim brethren in the city. It was under these circumstances that the ISI approached Dawood to carry out the serial blasts in the city. This act was perceived by Dawood and his subordinates as an opportunity to set the record straight. The post-mortem of the blasts would later reveal that all the targets of the attack were predominantly Hindu dominant areas. Hence, it can be argued that the metamorphosis of the identity of Dawood from a smuggler and a criminal to that of a terrorist was driven largely by the atmospheric pressure created by the social rift—a result of larger communal tactics employed by politicians that appealed to the religious sentiments of Hindus and Muslims.

This determinant of Dawood's identity as a terrorist by this logic is best explained by the strategic-choice theory in the study of terrorism. According to this theory, a group considers terrorism "a reasonable way of pursuing extreme interests in the political arena." Proponents of this theory would identify the D-Company as a group of reasoned, rational, cohesive actors functioning on the basis of a thorough cost-benefit analysis. The pressure on Dawood was too high, compelling him to act, but at the same time his options were limited as the enemy he would have to take on was the state. This meant that the resource disposal was unfavourably biased against him, implying that an alliance with the ISI and committing an act of terror was indeed a 'rational' move.

Extraneous Factors: Terrorism as an Instrument of State Policy

The decades of 1980s and 1990s witnessed the successful manifestation of ISI's policy of using terror modules as an instrument of state policy. Although efforts had begun as early as 1947–8, the Khalistani movement (Punjab Militancy) and the Kashmir militancy of the 1980s and 1990s provided a fertile ground for the ISI to successfully employ terror modules to achieve its policy ends. The ISI had learnt the tricks of covert warfare in Afghanistan in collaboration with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). These lessons were implemented in the Punjab and Kashmir theatres successfully and later, plans were made to expand it to include pan-Indian jihadism. It was under such circumstances that Dawood Ibrahim became a terrorist in 1993. However, was his identity as a terrorist shaped in the immediate aftermath of the blasts? This is where the question of extraneous factors like international politics comes into play in defining the identity of a terrorist. The description of Dawood used earlier in this article—a specially designated global terrorist—was developed by the US Treasury Department only in 2003. It was a decade after the horrors of 1993 Blasts had taken place. Following the Treasury Department, the Interpol designated him as a most wanted criminal.

What took these agencies and global powers such a long time to designate Dawood as a global terrorist? And, in the later years, what drove these agencies to affix the terrorist identity to a man they had until then shown reluctance? The answer to the former was that Pakistan and its deep state, the ISI, were a valuable pawn in the United States' Central Asian strategy. During the Cold War, struggle for control of Afghanistan between the United States and the Soviet Union had enabled the development of an alliance between the US and Pakistan that gave birth to the Mujahideen, which succeeded in ousting the Soviets from Afghanistan. India's unfavourable position within the US' regional balance of power matrix meant that Indian appeals for declaring Pakistan a state sponsor for terrorism could not be accommodated. In fact, the US was not just unreceptive of Indian appeals, but unequivocally hostile towards

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India and provided political and propaganda support to Pakistan, something that has been substantiated and corroborated by many analysts.

The 9/11 attacks, however, gave the US a bitter taste of Islamist terrorism, which until then was perceived by the US as a foreign phenomenon that did not affect its homeland. The 'War on Terror' mobilised every agency in the US to track any movements that had a bearing on international terrorism. At the same time, the US-India bilateral relations entered a new phase, defined by greater convergence on security matters. Among these, terrorism, proliferation of WMDs, international crime, narcotics were some of the immediate concerns that the two nations sought to address through bilateral cooperation. In this context, the US could not help but designate Dawood Ibrahim as a global terrorist since his empire of criminal syndicates was part of the financing of global jihad. This shift in the definition of US' national interests and that of the international institutions in which the US had a clout, marked a shift in recognition of Dawood as a global terrorist. Ergo, irrespective of Dawood's actions during 1993, the geopolitical shifts of the early millennium proved crucial in shaping the identity of Dawood as a terrorist.

Conclusion

The identification of an individual as a terrorist is entirely an expression of shared cultural values and interests. These cultural values can be visible at the individual, societal and international levels, as observed in this article. At the individual level, the intrinsic quest for money-making opportunities lured Dawood into crossing a line that transformed his identity into that of a terrorist. At the societal level, the shared cultural value between Dawood and the ISI was in the form of an expressed commitment to atone the misdeeds committed against Muslims in Bombay. When these interests met, being declared a terrorist was immaterial to Dawood as the act of serving justice to the Muslim victims of the communal riots was perceived to be a larger goal. Finally, with respect to the extraneous factor, the constructivist paradigm of shared cultural values becomes more critical in developing the terrorist identity. For years, Dawood wasn't declared a terrorist by the international community; nor was any action taken against his Pakistani sponsors, because such a move was politically not viable. Since 2001, as Indo-US relationship has entered a renewed phase based on shared concerns on terrorism, the identity of Dawood Ibrahim as a terrorist was established. Therefore, this case has shown that the subcontinental politics and societal dynamics shape the identity of a terrorist at three distinct levels for three distinct rationales—intrinsic, atmospheric and extraneous. Students of terrorism studies and militancy in South Asia will benefit from understanding that the identity of a terrorist is not just defined by their final act of terror but a deeper collaboration of shared interests between the identifier and the identified.

About the author:

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