Who Are the Global Terrorists?

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After the atrocities of September 11, the victim declared a 'war on terrorism', targeting not just the suspected perpetrators, but the country in which they were located, and others charged with terrorism worldwide. President Bush pledged to 'rid the world of evildoers' and 'not let evil stand', echoing Ronald Reagan's denunciation of the 'evil scourge of terrorism' in 1985 — specifically, state-supported international terrorism, which had been declared to be the core issue of US foreign policy as his administration came to office.[1] The focal points of the first war on terror were the MIddle East and Central America, where Honduras was the major base for US operations. The military component of the re-declared war is led by Donald Rumsfeld, who served as Reagan's special representative to the MIddle East; the diplomatic efforts at the UN by John Negroponte, Reagan's Ambassador to Honduras. Planning is largely in the hands of other leading figures of the Reagan-Bush (Snr) administrations.

The condemnations of terrorism are sound, but leave some questions unanswered. The first is 'What do we mean by "terrorism"?' Second, 'What is the proper response to the crime?' Whatever the answer, it must at least satisfy a moral truism: *if we propose some principle that is to be applied to antagonists, then we must agree — in fact, strenuously insist — that the principle apply to us as well.* Those who do not rise even to this minimal level of integrity plainly cannot be taken seriously when they speak of right and wrong, good and evil.

The problem of definintion is held to be vexing and complex. There are, however, proposals that seem straightforward, for example, in US Army manuals, which define terrorism as 'the calculated se of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious, or ideological in nature...through intimidation, coercion, or instiling, fear'.[2] That definition carries additional authority because of the timing: it was offered as the Reagan administration was intensifying its war on terrorism. The world was changed little enough so that these recent precednets should be instructive, even apart from the continuity of leadership from the first war on terrorism to its recent incarnation.

The first US war on terro received strong endorsement. The UN General Assembly condemned international terrorism two months after Reagan's denunciation, again in much stronger and

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[1] New York Times, October 18, 1985.

[2] US Army Operational Concept for Terrorism Counteraction (TRADOC Pamphlet No. 525–37, 1984).

more explicit terms, in 1987.[3] Support was not unanimous, however. The 1987 resolution passed 153 to 2, Honduras abstaining.

Explaining their negative vote, the US and Israel resolution could in any way prejudice the right to self-determination, freedom, and independence, as derived from the Charter of the United Nations, of people forcibly deprived of that right…, particularly peoples under colonial and racist regimes and foreign occupation'. That was understood to apply to the struggle of the African National Congress against the apartheid regime of South Africa (a US ally, while the ANC was officially labelled a 'terrorist organization'); and to the Israeli military occupation, then in its 20th year, sustained by US military and diplomatic support in virtual international isolation. Presumably because of US opposition, the UN resolution was scarcely reported (if at all) and has been effectively erased from the historical record; that is fairly standard practice.[4]

Reagan's 1985 condemnation referred specifically to terrorism in the Middle East, selected as the lead story of 1985 in an Associated Press poll. But for Secretary of State George Shultz, the administration moderate, the most 'alarming' manifestation of 'state-sponsored terrorism', a plague spread by 'depraved opponents of civilization itself' in 'a return to barbarism in the modern age', was frighteningly close to home. There is 'a cancer, right here in our land mass', Shultz informed Congress, threatening to conquer the hemisphere in a 'revolution without borders' — an interesting fabrication exposed at once but regularly reiterated with appropriate shudders.[5]

So severe was the threat on Law Day (May 1) 1985, the president announced an embargo 'in response to the emergency situation created by the Nicaraguan Government's aggressive activities in Central America'. He also declared a national emergency, renewed annually, because 'the policies and actions of the Government of Nicaragua constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the nation security and foreign policy of the United States'.

'The terrorists — and the other states that aid and abet them — serve as grim reminders that democracy is fragile and needs to be guarded with vigilance', Shultz warned. We must 'cut [the Nicaraguan cancer] out', and not by gentle means: 'Negotiations are a euphemism for capitulation if the shadow of power is not cast across the bargaining table', Shultz declared, condemning those who advocate 'utopian, legalistic means outside mediation, the United Nations, and the World Court, while ignoring the power element of the equation' with mercenary forces based in Honduras, under Negroponte's supervision, and successfully blocking the 'utopian, legalistic means' pursued by the World Court and the Latin American Contadora nations — as Washington continued to do until its terrorist wars were won.[6]

Reagan's condemnation of the 'evil scourge' was issued at a meeting in Washington with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who arrived to join in the call to extirpate the evil shortly after he had sent his bombers to attack Tunis, killing 75 people with smart bombs that tore them to shreds, among other atrocities recorded by the prominent Israeli journalist Amnon Kapeliouk on the

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[3] General Assembly Resolution 40/61, December 9, 1985; Resolution 42/159, December 7, 1987.

[4] See my Necessary Illusions (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), chapter 4; and my essay 'International Terrorism: Image and Reality' in Alex George (ed.) Western State Terrorism (Cambridge: Polity Press/Blackwell, 1991).

[5] George Shultz, 'Terrorism: The Challenge to the Democracies' (State Department, Current Policy No. 589, June 24, 1984); 'Terrorism and the Modern World' (State Department, Current Policy No. 629, October 25, 1984). For Shultz's congressional testimony 1986, 1983, the former part of a major campaign to gain more funding for the contras, see Jack Spence 'The US Media: Covering (Over) Nicaragua' and Eldon Kenworthy 'Selling the Policy' in Thomas Walker (ed.) Reagan versus the Sandinistas (Boulder, CO, and London: Westview Press, 1987).

[6] George Shultz, 'Moral Principles and Strategic Interests' (State Department, Current Policy No. 820, April 14, 1986).

scene. Washington cooperated by failing to warn its ally Tunisia that the bombers were on their way. Shultz informed Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir that Washington 'had considerable sympathy for the Israeli action', but drew back when the UN Security Council unanimously denounced the bombing as an 'act of armed aggression'. The United States abstained in the vote.[7]

A second candidate for most extreme act of Mideast international terrorism in the peak year of 1985 is a car-bombing in Beirut on March 8 that killed 80 people and wounded 256. The bomb was placed outside a mosque, timed to explode when worshippers left. 'About 250 girls and women in flowing black chadors, pouring out of Friday prayers at the Imam Rida Mosque, took the brunt of the blast', Nora Boustany reported. The bomb also 'burned babes in their beds', killed children 'as they walked home from the mosque' and 'devastated the main street of the densely populated' West Beirut suburb. The target was a Shi'ite leader accused of complicity in terrorism, but he escaped. The crime was ogranized by the CIA and its Saudi clients with the assistance of British intelligence.[8]

The only other competitor for the prize for the most extreme terrorist atrocity in the Mideast in the peak year of 1985 is the 'Iron Fist' operations that Peres directed in March in occupied Lebanon. They reached new depths of 'calculated brutality and arbitrary murder', a Western diplomat familiar with the area observed, as the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) shelled villages, carted off the male population, killed dozens of villagers in addition to many massacred by the IDF's paramilitary associates, shelled hospitals and took patients away for 'interrogation', along with numerous other strocities.[9] The IDF High Command described the targets as 'terrorist villagers'. The operations against them must continue, the military correspondent of the Jerusalem Post, Hirsh Goodman, added, because the IDF must 'maintain order and security' in occupied Lebanon despite 'the price the inhabitants will have to pay'.

Like Israel's invasion of Lebanon three years earlier that left some 18,000 dead, these actions and others in Lebanon were not undertaken in self-defence but rather for political ends, as recognized at once in Israel. The same was true, almost entirely, of those attacks that followed, up to Peres' murderous invation of 1996. But all relied crucially on US military and diplomatic support. Accordingly, they too do not enter the annals of international terrorism.

In brief, there was nothing odd about the proclamations of the leading co-conspirators in Mideast international terrorism, which therefore passed without comment at the peak moment of horror at the 'return to barbarism'.

The well-remembered prize-winner for 1985 is the hijacking of the Achille Lauro and the brutal murder of a passenger, Leon Klinghoffer. It was doubtless a vile terrorist act, and surely not justified by the chain that it was in retaliation for the far worse Tunis, atrocities and a preemptive effort to deter others. Adopting moral truisms, the same holds of our own acts of retaliation or pre-emption.

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[7] New York Times, October 17, 18, 1985; Amnon Kapeliouk, Yediot Ahronot, November 15, 1985; Los Angeles Times, October 3, 1985; Geoffrey Jansen, MIddle East International, October 11, 1985; Bernard Gwertzman, New York Times, October 2, 7, 1985.

[8] Nora Boustany, Washington Post Weekly, March 14, 1988; Bob Woodward, Weil (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 396f.

[9] Guardian, March 6, 1985. For details and srouces, see my 'Middle East Terrorism and the American Ideological System', in Pirates and Emperors (New York: Claremont, 1986; Montreal: Black Rose, 1988), reprinted in Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (eds) Blaming the Victims (London: Verso, 1988).

Evidently, we have to qualify the definition of 'terrorism' given in official sources: the term applies only to terrorism against us, not the terrorism we carry out against them. The practice is conventional, even among the most extreme mass murderers: the Nazis were protecting the population from terrorist partisans directed from abroad, while the Japanese were labouring selflessly to create an 'earthly paradise' as they fough off the 'Chinese badits' terrorizing the peaceful people of Manchuria and their legitimate government. Exceptions would be hard to find.

The same convention applies to war to exterminate the 'Nicaraguan cancer'. On Law Day 1984, President Reagan proclaimed that without law there can be only 'chaos and disorder'. The day before, he had announced that the US would disregard the proceedings of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which went on to condemn his administration for its 'unlawful use of force', ordering it to terminate these international terrorist crimes and pay substantial reparations to Nicaragua (June 1986). The ICJ decision was dismissed with contempt, as was a subsequent Security Council resolution calling on all states to observe international law (vetoed by the US) and repeated General Assembly resolutions (US and Israel opposed, in one case joined by El Salvador).

As the ICJ decision was announced, Congress substantially increased funding for the mercenary forces engaged in 'the unlawful use of force'. Shortly after, the US command directed them to attack 'soft targets' — undefended civilian targets — and to avoid combat with the Nicaraguan army, as they could do thanks to US control of the skies and the sophisticated communication equipment provided to the terrorist forces. The tactic was considered reasonable by prominent commentators as long as it satisfied 'the test of cost-benefit analysis', an analysis of 'the amount of blood and misery that will be poured in, and the likelihood that democracy will emerge at the other end' — 'democracy' as Western elites understand the term, an interpretation illustrated graphically in the region.[10]

State Department legal advisor Abraham Sofaer explained why the US was entitled to reject ICJ jursidiction. In earlier years, most members of the UN 'were aligned with the United States and shared its views regarding world order', but since decolonizaiton a 'majority often opposes the United States on important international questions'. Accordingly, the US mst 'reserve to ourselves the power to determine' how it will act and which matters fall 'essentially within the domestic jursidiction of the United States, as determined by the United States' — in this case, th eterrorist acts against NIcaragua condemned by the ICJ and the UN Security Council. For similar reasons, since the 1960s the US has been far in the lead in vetoing Security Council resolutions on a wide range of issues, with Britian second and France a distant third.[11]

Washington waged its 'war on terrorism' by creating an international terror network of unprecedented scale, and employing it worldwide with lethal and long-lasting effects. In Central America, terror guided and supported by the US reached its most extreme levels in countries where the state security forces themselves were the immediate agents of international terrorism. The effects were reviewed in a 1994 conference organized by Salvadoran Jesuits, whose experiences had been particularly gruesome.[12] The conference report takes particular note of the effects of the residual 'culture of terror...in domesticating the expectations of the majority vis-a-vis alternatives different to those of the powerful', an important observation on the effi-

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[10] For details, see my Culture of Terrorism (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1988), p 77f.

[11] Abraham Sofaer, The United States and the World Court (State Department, Current Policy No. 769, December 1985).

[12] Juan Hernandez Pico, Envio (Managua: Universidad Centroamericana, March 1994).

cacy of state terror that generalizes broadly. In Latin America, the September 11 atrocities were harshly condemned, but commonly with the observation that they are nothing new. THey may be described as 'Armageddon', and others fared far worse under the vast plague of state terror that swept through the continent from the early 1960s, much of it traceable to Washington.[13]

It is hardly surprising that Washington's call for support in its war of revenge for September 11 had little resonance in Latin America. An international Gallup pol found that support for the military force rather than extradition ranged from 2 per cent (Mexico) to 11 per cent (Venezuela and Colombia). Condemnations of the September 11 attacks were regularly accompanied by recollections of their own suffering — for example, the death of perhaps thousands of poor people (Western crimes, therefore unexamined) when George Bush Snr bombed the barrio Chorillo in Panama in December 1989 in Operation Just Cause, undertaken to kidnap a disobedient thug who was sentenced to life imprisonment in Florida for crimes mostly committed while he was on the CIA payroll.[14]

THe record continues to the present without essential change, apart from the modification of pretexts and tactics. The list of leading recipients of US arms yields ample evidence, familiar to those acquainted with international human rights reports.

It therefore comes as no surprise that President Bush informed Afghans that bombing will continue until they hand over people the US suspects of terrorism (rebuffing requests for evidence and tentative offers of negotiation). Or, when new war aims were added after three weeks of bombing, that Admiral SIr Michael Boyce, chief of the British Defence Staff, warned Afghans that US-UK attacks will continue 'until the people of the country themselves recognize that this is going to go on until they get the leadership changed'.[15] *In other words, the US and UK will persist in the 'calculated use of violence to attain goals that are political...in nature': this is international terrorism in the technical sense, but is excluded from the canon by the standard convention.* The rationale is essentially that of the US-Israel internation terrrorist operations in Lebanon. Admiral Boyce was virtually repeating the words of the eminent Israeli statesman Abba Eban as Reagan declared the first war on terrorism. Replying to Prime Minister Menachem Begin's account of atrocities in Lebanon committed under the Labour government in the style 'of regimes which neither Mr Begin nor I would dare to mention by name', Eban acknowledge the accuracy of the account but added the standard justification that 'there was a rational prospect, ultimately fulfilled, that affected populations would exert pressure for the cessation of hostilities'.[16]

These concepts articulated by Eban and Boyce are conventional, as is the resort to terrorism when deemed appropriate. Furthermore, its success is openly celebrated. The devastation caused by US terror operations in Nicaragua was described qite frankly, leaving Americans 'United in joy' at their successful outcome, the press proclaimed. The massacre of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians in 1965, mostly landless peasants, was greeted with unconstrained euphoria, along with praise for Washington for concealing its own critical role, which might have embarrassed the 'Indonesian moderates' who had cleaned their society in a 'staggering mass slaughter' that

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[13] Envio, October 2001. For a judicious review of the aftermath, see Thomas Walker and Ariel Armony (eds) Repression, Resistance, and Democratic Transition in Central America (Wilmington, MC: Scholarly Resources, 2000).

[14] Envio, October 2001; Panamanian journalist Ricardo Stevens, NACLA Report on the Americas, November/December 2001.

[15] Patrick Tyler and Elisabeth Bumiller, New York Times, October 12, 2001, p. 1; Michael Gordon, New York Times, October 28, 2001, p. 1.

[16] Jerusalem Post, August 16, 1981.

the CIA compared to the crimes of Stalin, Hitler and Mao.[17] There are many other examples. One might wonder why Osama bin Laden's disgraceful exultation over the atrocities of September 11 occasioned indignant surprise. But that would be an error, based on failure to distinguish their terror, which is evil, from ours, which is noble, the operative principle thoughout history.

If we keep to official definitions, it is a serious error to describe terrorism as the weapon of the weak. Like most weapons, it is wielded to far great effect by the strong. But then it is not terror; rather, 'counterterror', or 'low-intensity warfare' or 'self-defence' and, if successful, 'rational' and 'pragmatic', and an occasion to be 'united in joy'.

Let us turn to the question of proper response to the crime, bearing in mind the governing moral truism. If, for example, Admiral Boyce's dictum is legitimate, then victims of Western state terrorism are entitled to act accordingly. That conclusion is properly regarded as outrageous. Therefore the principle is outrageous when applied to official enemies; even more so when we recognize that the actions were undertaken with the expectation that they would place huge numbers of people at grave risk. No knowledgeable authority seriously questioned the UN estimate that '7.5 million Afghans will need food over the winter — 2.5 million more than on Sept. 11':[18] a 50 per cent increase as a result of the threat of bombing, then the actuality, wiht a toll that will never be investigaged if history is any guide.

A different proposal, put forth by the Vatican among others, was spelled out by military historian Michael Howard: 'a police operation conducted under the auspices of the United States...against a criminal conspiracy whose members whould be hunted down and brought before an international court, where they would receive a fair trial and, if found guilty, be awared an appropriate sentence'.[19] Though never contemplated, the proposal seems reasonable. If so, then it would be reasonable if applied to Western state terrorism; something that could also never be contemplated, though for opposite reasons.

The war in Afghanistan has commonly been described as a 'just war'; indeed, evidently so. There have been some attempts to frame concept of 'just war' that might support the judgment. We may therefore ask how these proposals fare when evaluated in terms of the same moral truism. I have yet to see one that does not instantly collapse: application of the proposed concept to Western state terrorism would be considered unthinkable, if not despicable. For example, we might ask how the proposals would apply to the once case that is uncontroversial in th elight of the judgments of the highest international authorities, Washington's war against Nicaragua; uncontroversial, that is, among those who have some commitment to international law and treaty obligations. It is an instructive experiment.

Similiar questions arise in connection with other aspects of the wars on terrorism. There has been debate over whether the US-UK war in Afghanistan was authorized by ambiguous Security Council resolutions, but that is beside the point. The US surely could have obtained clear and unambiguous authorization (not always for attractive reaons — Russia and China eagerly joined the coalition in the hope of gaining US support for their own terrorist atrocities, and the K and France would not have exercised the veto), but that course was rejected, presumably because it would suggest that there is some higher authority to which the US should defer, a condition that a state with overwhelming power is not likely to accept. There is even a name for that stance in the

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[17] For an extensive review, see my Necessary Illusions; Deterring Democracy (London: Verso, 1991)(Nicaragua); Year 501 (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1993)(Indonesia).

[18] Elisabeth Bumiller and Elizabeth Becker, New York Times, October 17, 2001.

[19] Foreign Affairs, January/February 2002; Tania Branigan, Guardian, October 31, 2001.

literature of diplomacy and international relations: establishing 'credibility', a standard official justification for the resort to violence — the bombing of Serbia, to mention a recent example. The refusal to consider the negotiated transfer of the suspected perpetrators presumably had the same grounds.

The moral truism applies to such matters as well. The US refuses to extradite terrorists even when their guilt is well-established. Once current case involves Emmanuel Constant, the leader of the Haitian paramilitary forces that were responsible for thousands of brutal killings in the early 1990s under the military junta, which Washington officially opposed but tacitly supported, publicly undermining the Organization of American States' embargo and secretly authorizing oil shipments. Constant was sentenced in absentia by a Haitian court. The elected government has repeatedly called on the US to extradite him, again on September 30, 2001, while Taliban initiatives to negotiate the transfer of bin Laden were being dismissed with contempt. Haiti's request was again ignored, probably because of concerns about what Constant might reveal about ties to the US government during the period of terror. *Do we therefore conclude that Haiti has the right to use force to compel his extradition, following as best it can Washington's model in Afghanistan?* The very idea is outrageous, yielding another prima facie violation of the moral truism.

Its all too easy to add illustrations.[20] Consider Cuba, probably the main target of international terrorism since 1959, remarkable in scale and character, some of it exposed in declassified documents on Kennedy's Operation Mongoose and continuing to the late 1990s. Cold War pretexts were ritually offered as longas that was possible, but internally the story was the one commony unearthed on inquiry. It was recounted in secret by Arthur Schlesinger, reporting the conclusions of JFK's Latin American mission to the incoming president: the Cuban threat is 'the spread of the Castro idea of taking matters into one's own hands', which might stimulate the 'poor and underprivileged' in other countries, who 'are now demanding opportunities for a decent living' — the 'virus' or 'rotten apple' effect, as it is called in high places. The Cold War connection was that 'the Soviet Union hovers in the wings, flourishing large development loands and presenting itself as the model for achieving modernization in a single generation'.[21]

True, these exploits of international terrorism — which were quite serious — are excluded by the standard convention. But suppose we keep to the official definition. In accord with the theories of 'just war' and proper response, how has Cuban been entitled to react?

It is fair enough to denounce international terrorism as a plague spread by 'depraved opponents of civilization itself'. The commitment to 'drive the evil from the world' can even be taken seriously, if it satisfieds moral truisms — not, it would seem, an entirely unreasonable thought.

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[20] For a sample, see George, Western State Terrorism.

[21] Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–63, vol. XII, American Republics, pp.13f., 33.