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Contemporary Security Issues

Can the “War on Terror” be won by either side?

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In the realm of international security, the main concern during the last decade is most probably terrorism. Both in academic research and public opinion after the events of September 11th these issues grabbed the majority of focus, especially since the declaration of the “war on terror”. While more of a figure of speech than a war in actuality, with the famous speech by George W. Bush\(^1\) the term became iconic of the current international situation. Interventions in the Middle Eastern region, such as the Iraq War of 2003 – 2011 and the ongoing Afghanistan War since 2001, that constitute this “War on Terror” have not yielded the expected results. As conflicts drag on, often with little apparent gains, a question whether this struggle can be decided arises. In this essay I intend to argue that the struggle cannot and will not be ended decisively. First of all I will focus on the fact that the term terrorism itself is not clearly and uniformly defined which results in evaluating the issue as well as see to some related problems. Secondly I will try and analyse the strategy employed against terrorism and the debate between containing and defeating terrorism. Lastly I will try to look critically at the terrorist tactics and groups as well to show that there are serious problems posed for their side as well.

Reaching an agreement on defining terrorism has been an issue that outdates the “War on Terror” by decades. The phrase “‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’”\(^2\) has been used in this debate in 1987 already and has remained prominent since then. Some researchers argue that a “correct and objective definition of terrorism” can be achieved\(^3\) but the fact remains that no consensus in international organizations has been achieved. Moreover, not only is it tough to agree on between states, but there are also disparities on the intra-state level; the CIA and FBI differ notably in their definitions and interpretation of the Title 22 of the US Code, Section 2656f(d) entry regarding terrorism. This problem stems from several issues. First of all, terrorist tactics are very versatile and often do not require a large amount of resources, neither with regard to manpower, nor technology or funds. As a result the scale of these operations can vary virtually infinitely, from a single rogue individual committing atrocities to a whole organization with a global reach attacking significant targets on foreign soil. Especially in the former cases it becomes problematic to classify such cases.

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\(^1\) See http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm
A distinction between a madman with no political aim and a “grass-root terrorist” is almost a guess; and was one to classify such a man as a terrorist, a single definition can hardly cover both extremes of the phenomenon while remaining practical in any way. All in all, with so many ways to define terrorism and no singular universal definition evaluating the probability of either side winning is inconclusive at best.

To combat the threat of terrorism several approaches have been developed. As described by Paul Rodgers three general ideas of counter-terrorism can be distinguished. The most traditional one is also the most simple and revolves around physically counteracting, eliminating threats ideally before they materialize and general policing. This is mainly seen in intrastate affairs, as terrorist groups can be identified and taken down within the authority of a state. The second approach treats terrorist groups as military organizations that can be defeated. Such a notion is the backbone of the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the enemy could be localized and pursued so that a regular army had valid targets. Lastly, the third major view on dealing with terrorism is focused on the social situation, environment and motives of the groups. That attitude is perhaps the most complex one as it requires extensive knowledge and may also warrant employment of military and policing elements. Most recently this approach has been developing and is the main hope for success. However, upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that none of these options actually aim at winning the “War on Terror”. First approach is akin to policing and aims at dealing with terrorists on a case to case basis; “winning against terrorism” cannot be expected in the same sense that “winning against crime” should not be. The second way initially brought great hopes, especially with the swift military victories both in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the conflicts have lingered far and beyond these initial successes, exposing flaws of the strategy. Training camps and terrorist presence have been dealt with but when some organizations die out new ones arise. Though perhaps not on purpose, the strategy of defeating changed into the policy of containment. The last approach has yet to prove itself in the long run, but it seems to focus on limiting the threat rather than defeating it.

If there seems to be virtually no chance of winning the struggle against terrorism, the next question to ask is whether it can be lost. I would argue that because of the limited

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4 A whole argument around that theory can be found in Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008
5 Alex P. Schmid in the second chapter of *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, Taylor & Francis, 2011, provides a staggering 250 definitions of terrorism
effectiveness of terrorism as well as its perpetual extremism it does not pose a serious enough political threat to come on top in this struggle. Max Abrahms, argues in his research\(^7\) that terrorism is not statistically and practically an effective strategy. Through analysing 28 terrorist groups he arrives at the conclusion that such organizations very rarely achieve their objectives, especially maximalist ones. He also notes that terrorist tactics are flawed by default; they use indiscriminate violence to achieve their aims, warping the political agenda into an existential conflict in which none of the parties can concede. In his view “the self-defeating policy consequences of terrorism will ultimately dissuade potential jihadists from supporting it”.\(^8\) This notion is further reinforced through a study by Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker. In their view, “violent extremism in its global and ambitious form is attractive only for groups at the outer edge, the flat end of a popular support curve”.\(^9\) They argue that with the rise of media and communications the militant groups have been locked in a perpetual, vicious circle of extremism. The reasoning here is that previously terrorists had to moderate views and actions over time to achieve popularity, support and progress. Now, instead of having to undergo this shift, the groups can remain extremist as they are able to reach those few radicals over the internet or with other media. Both of these theories in conjunction clearly show the improbability of the “War on Terror” being won by either side.

In conclusion, even though reaching agreements on the key definitions seems unachievable at the moment, the broadly understood “War on Terror” seems to be a perpetual conflict. While politicians and leaders consistently rally support for the cause, none of the approaches or strategies employed actually pose a solution or a way to “victory”. From the other side however, terrorism also remains the weapon of the weak. Inherent weaknesses of the strategy or tactic do not yield significant results in achieving political goals of those responsible. Furthermore, these weaknesses seem to be increasingly significant with the development of technology and social media, on the one hand preserving the groups, on the other hand preventing their evolution. All in all, it seems that in future terrorism will be a marginalized issue, intended to kept under control and dealt with much like intra-state crime has been for centuries.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 76