Perspectives on Terrorism, Resistance and Radicalization

On the 26th of September 2010, experts from varying academic backgrounds gathered in Doha, Qatar for a two-day workshop titled Perspectives on Terrorism, Resistance and Radicalisation. This workshop was organized by Al Jazeera Centre for Studies in partnership with the Economic and Social Research Council, UK and the European Muslim Research Centre, Exeter University.

The terms terrorism, resistance, and radicalism have been exhausted in the media and are a source of uncertainty amongst academics and the general public. The goal of this Workshop was to conduct a full and frank exchange of views and to build bridges between the varying points of views of experts from Europe, the United States and the Arab World. The Workshop was also intended to pave the way for a second bigger meeting of experts in the following year of 2011 to mark the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

For those few days, academics and politicians enjoyed the opportunity of meeting and learning from each other to discuss their individual point of views on terrorism, resistance and radicalization. The experts were selected across varying disciples and from different regions, in addition to different political leanings. As Stuart Croft, moderator, astutely pointed out all the experts came together as individual researchers without the added burden of representing their respective organizations and institutions; this gave the participants a greater freedom to express their individual opinions.

The Workshop was constructed around four topical sessions scheduled over two days. Each session was compromised of five brief presentations from a panel of experts, followed by vigorous discussion and debate. As expected the few genuine consensuses were reached instead many new questions were raised .

Based on the presentations of the 24 panelists and the discussions that followed, this report identifies three main categories that sum up the various themes brought up.

Terrorism, Resistance, & Radicalization
The Elusive Search for a Definitive Conceptual Framework

The first session was dedicated to providing concise definitions for each of the three key terms: terrorism, resistance and radicalization. However, the debate over terms and their definitions (or lack thereof) continued well into the concluding session. The debate can be divided into two broad categories:

- Terrorism versus Resistance
- Radicalization

The first category was unequivocally the more controversial of the two. A Bruce Hoffman says we have reached a "definitional paralysis" when it comes to terrorism. Panelist Shanquiti continued to state that the reason for this paralysis is that as societies we do not want to put the same weight on our actions as we do to others.

The discussion over terrorism and by extension its flipside, resistance, revolved around these four important questions: Is terrorism an ideology or strategy? Is there one simple definition? Who determines the definitions? And finally, is it possible to reach a consensus.

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Terrorism: Strategy or Ideology

The definitions of terrorism vary widely, but what is generally agreed upon is that modern terrorism is a strategy (not an ideology). It is safe to say that the all attendees agreed to this important distinction, however, during presentations an discussions there was a continued use of the term "terrorist" and "terrorists" in reference to groups that use terrorist tactics. This was indicative of the influence that the media has upon our rhetoric and way of thinking.

Is There One Definition for Terrorism

The differences arise when some definitions include other determinants to the mix. The most common addition specifies that the violence has to be directed at civilians, other definitions add that the terrorists' modus operandi is through spreading fear and terror with the help of the media. Still others argue that terrorists are not always non-state actors but can be sponsored by the state or be the state itself.

Panelists Rasha Awad and Jamie Bartlett believed that terrorism could be easily defined in a way that would please all parties. Awad defined terrorism as political violence that targets or kills civilians. Bartlett's definition was more anecdotal: a terrorist act is leaving a bomb in a rucksack in some civilian populated mall. From this we can infer that both Awad and Bartlett would agree that terrorism is the asymmetrical use of violence against civilians for a political gain.

However there is an inherent flaw to this definition that did not escape the audience of experts who quickly discredited this simplistic understanding during the discussion sessions. Saying that terrorism targets civilians does not differentiate terrorism from classic war, and then we would simply be dragged into a never ending Just War theory debate.

The flipside of terrorism, resistance, was supported as legitimate in the face of occupation. All the panelists agreed to the collective right of rebellion. In the Muslim tradition it is called the duty of disobedience, in the Magna Carta it is included in the security clause, and in the Declaration of Independence it is called the right to abolish destructive governments.

In Ben O'Loughlin's research one of the questions on the survey was whether violence can ever be justified. Most answered that violence was not wrong if it was for the advancement of democracy which shows that people still believe in the right of resistance in its theoretical framework. For the most part during the Workshop there was a remarked lack of further exploration into the terms of legitimate resistance except for Amr Hamzawi's insightful questions on resistance: Why is it that self determination has left the literature? What are the 'rules' for legitimized resistance? Is it a national duty to resist occupation? Once resistance has won what happens next.

Who Determines the Definitions

For states, terrorism is an extremely useful and malleable term. From a state's point of view they are the sole purveyor of legitimate violence and those who use violence outside that sphere are considered terrorists. A common theme across the different sessions was a reiteration from some of the experts; especially those situated in Arab countries, that the term terrorism will always be defined by the stronger party. On a national level the stronger party would be the state, and on an international level that would be the West (the West being a euphemism for the United States of America).

Fahmi Howeidy stated that the stronger party will always dictate the definitions, which is a fair point. However, he took it even further to say that the concerns voiced

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in the Workshop were purely pertinent to the West and not the Arab world. The debate about terrorism and radicalism is a Western debate that predates 9/11 and Osama bin laden, who is incidentally a "made in the USA" issue. The clash between the West and the Arab world is almost primordial, argued Howeidy.

Terrorism for Arabs is Israel. The Arab world can't be asked to take part of a Western concern while it is being mistreated and disrespected through Western funds to Israel, through bans on Muslim symbols in Europe (minarets, hijab, niqab et cetera).

The second category, radicalization, was in general less controversial than the terms terrorism and resistance. The common ground of the discussion was that radicalism was not an exclusively Muslim phenomenon.

Rosalind Hackett argued that radicalism was neither a new nor just a Muslim phenomenon. Hackett urged academics to study the historical occurrences of radicalism and religious intolerance in the United States. Indeed some would say, controversially however, that Muslims in the US have not suffered half as much as Catholics have suffered historically. For her research in Nigeria, Hackett chose to study the more controversial and understudied Christian militancy to show that radicalism existed in other religious organizations as well. As we all know the media and academia tend to focus on Muslim militancy.

Stuart Croft argued that radicalization should be positioned as a social phenomenon before we go forward. He offered four thoughts as to what radicalisation is. First of all we are wrong to look for the dimensions of radicalisation in only one sphere. Radicalisation takes place in a whole range of different expressions such as literature, music, poetry, and other forms of human interaction.

Amr Hamzawi backed up this first point calling it Tadyeen almafaheem started post 9/11. It is a political geo-struggle not a struggle over terms. Identity. They say Islamism, we say war on Islam too much religion.

Secondly back to Stuart a radicalised group has to have a sense of its own purity, exclusivity and that it is in the right and defending something that is under some existential threat. Third, a radicalised group believes it is the vanguard; an elite that represents a wide group. Finally, the same group must believe that the stakes are so high that violent action is required.

A Consensus

Is it possible to reach a unified definition of the terms terrorism, resistance or radicalization? Some of the audience argued that it was impossible to reach a unified definition considering that the stronger party will always have the final word. Other, like Wisal Alazzawi, argued that it was misguided to use the terms at all since they are western constructs that have no bearing on the different individual conflicts going around the world.

Funmi Olonisakin argued that the lack of a clear definition for any of the three terms (terrorism, radicalism, and resistance) is intentional. It allows the elites the freedom to always prescribe it to their opponents and it allows them to never be described as terrorists or extremists; after all just like history is written by the victor, labels are defined by the more powerful group.

There is a shred of truth to the last argument, however, Stuart Croft pointed in the Concluding Session that there is a crucial need to have a clear definitions because it is an important act of resistance to have such definitions. Why? Because these are more likely than not linked to Islam and the discourse surrounding these terms seems to

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suggest that there is something specific about Islam and Muslims that lends to radicalization. Only by standing by clear and unified definitions can we attempt to dispel this bias.

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The Sources of Terrorism
The Margins of the Society Vis a Vis its Center

A debate surrounding the sources of terrorism took place throughout the two days of the conference. Four main theories were posited by the participants. First, the root cause of terrorism was Islam and the misapplication of Islamic ideals. Second, terrorism was driven by a combination of archaic Islamic education, poverty, and a history of drug abuse. The third theory argued that terrorism was a function of elite struggle. And the last and most popular theory amongst the participants was that terrorism was driven by a large variety of psychological, political, and socioeconomic factors that depended on the context of the specific conflict in question. This last theory carried on to an intense discussion about the margins of society vis a vis its center.

Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban belonged to the first group of thought; she offered the example of the current Sudanese government as a regime of "terror". Fluehr-Lobban explained that through Sudan's imposition of Islamization and Arabization they had terrorized the non-Muslim population of Sudan. She specifically cited the misapplication of Shari'ah penalties as a form of terrorism and as the main cause of the rupture between Northern and Southern Sudan.

This met a lot of debate as some argued that the Shari'ah law was only an instrument to the regime and not the reason behind the political and ethnic divide. That in fact the story was much more complicated and more of a political struggle than a religious one. This ties into the problem, addressed earlier, of confining radicalism and terrorism to the religious sphere, and to be frank, confining it to the Islamic religion while in fact the situation is almost always a political one.

The second theory was presented by Moataz Al-Khatib. According to Al-Khatib's findings the people most susceptible to recruitment were within the 17-28 age range, had some form of religious upbringing and a history of drug addiction. However, Al Khatib's research relied on a small pool of subjects within Morocco and did not reflect the findings in the other experts' research.

Funmi offer a third point of view. Her research attempted to explain the sudden explosion of intolerance within a pluralistic state relying on Nigeria as the main case study. Relying on an instrumentalist interpretation of ethnic unrest, she suggested that violence and radicalization are a function of elite struggle. The elite manipulate the ethnic and religious divides for their own purposes and this leads to terrorism.

The Need for Context Specific Analysis

In a heartening consensus most experts argued for the final theory: the need for country specific analysis. Terrorism is caused by a variety of psychological, political, and socioeconomic factors that are determined by the context of the conflict.

Fiona Adamson said that each conflict case had its own political context that included perceived injustices in various forms of state repression, poverty, as well as a variety of other factors. Drawing from literature about wars and conflict we know that one has to be careful of making a simple connection between injustices or poverty with conflict; the complete story is always more complicated than that.

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Panelist Basheer Nafi believed that linking terrorism and radicalization to the Islamic texts, Salfis, or even poverty ignores the uniqueness of different conflicts stated that in every conflict case we need to go to the specific context, the Al Qaeda in Iraq is different from that in North Yemen; to link them together is just foolish. Shanquitt echoed the same sentiments saying that terrorism is a product of its time and place and that no theological interpretation can explain it. Religion can be used as a justification, but it does not motivate people to engage in terrorism.

Shanquitt continued to specifically address the chronic injustices committed by the West against Muslims as a backdrop from which terrorism has been born. Those injustices are support of Israel, backing up Arab dictatorship, and strategic infiltration in Muslim regions.

On the psychological front Abdullah Faliq reasoned that terrorism lured in new recruits with its alternative world view and charismatic leadership. He also agreed with Shanquitt and Nafi about the role of domestic issues in increasing or decreasing terrorist attacks.

More on the psychological and domestic side, Jamie Bartlett explained the allure of Al Qaeda to the domestically discontented youth. Bartlett presented the Demos study on why some people turn to violence to express their discontent and others do not by comparing two groups. The first compromised of convicted "terrorists" from Canada, UK, Netherlands, and France and the second compromised of radical thinkers from the same milieu that did not resort to violence. The first group was labelled terrorists and the second was labeled extremists.

In their research they reached the conclusion that Al-Qaida presented a very glamorous alternative to the terrorists. They saw Al Qaeda as a group that would stand up to capitalism, a counterculture and anti-establishment group which is always exiting for a young people. Adding violence made it only more exciting.

Margins of the Society

The debate continued into a discussion about the radical margins of the society vis a vis its more moderate centre. Ben O'Laughlin was the first to point out that a society's identification with its margins is the crucial to understanding radicalization. Ghanoushi said that terrorism always existed in the margins of the Islamic empire, what the West did was bring the marginalized terrorists into the heart of the Muslim world.

Fiona Adamson said that the Muslim identity is becoming an increasingly bright boundary in Europe, and as academics and politicians we should exert discretion when we use terms that contribute to this process of polarization. The dynamic of fear, the political mobilization of fear by groups that exercise terrorism and counter-terrorism operations have contributed to a stronger self-other dichotomy where the Muslim identity becomes hegemonic.

Croft and Bartlett joined Adamson in arguing against false dichotomies such as "Islam versus The West" and "Us against Them". These dichotomies create very bright boundaries between groups as opposed to the more moderate and realistic blurred and nuanced boundaries. Radical groups create this polarized identity through the creation of false kinships, argued Adamson. The enduring lack of clarity in terminology and definitions makes it easy for these groups to claim old rhetoric, said Croft.

Practical Solutions

The three main practical solutions presented in the workshop were Islamic reform, Media

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reform and the establishment of a safe environment for Arab and Muslim youth to channel their frustration. The last sentiment that pervaded the discussion was a call for an equality of suffering.

Islamic Reform

The first point of view was argued by Awad. Awad believed that we need to reform religious education in the Arab and Muslim World. Classical religious education clashes fundamentally with the teachings of the 21st century and fosters a black and white way of thinking, the same problem that Bartlett and Adamson addressed in their research. Furthermore Awad said that religious rhetoric in the Arab and Muslim world praises Al Qaeda leading the youth to extremism; which is precisely what we do not need today, what we need is a more moderation.

Awad's proposal met a lot of resistance from the other participants as they argued that the situation with religious education was far more nuanced and open to interpretation. Religious education in the Al Azhar School in Egypt was miles apart from the education of madrasas in Pakistan.

Soumaya Ghanoushi argued that religious education has been a constant in the history of the Arab and Muslim world. It is not a new phenomenon, indeed the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were graduates of Western institutions, by this logic should we then close down the University of Munich.

Media

The media presents to main problems today: first it exaggerates the threat of international terrorism and secondly it perpetrates myths about what it means to be a terrorist that results in a polarization of the margins vis a vis the centre.

In the first session Ben O'Loughlin says, while there is an uncertainty about what radicalism means from the Academia (perhaps because, unlike other abstract notions these issues are too close to home?), there is a pressure from the public on journalists to provide certainty and to report something concrete.

There is a myth that anyone who checks out websites with Jihadi material could easily become influenced and radicalized. This myth is concocted by the media. Based on an interview of British Muslims, they believed that the atrocities committed in Palestine lured new recruits to terrorist movements not the websites.

Why do the media continue to highlight international terrorism instead of focusing on individual domestic cases? Ninety-five percent of terrorist acts worldwide are domestic; however we always end up focusing on the measly five percent international attacks. Basheer Nafi said that media in the West should revaluate its unhealthy obsession with terrorism and radicalization. Al Qaeda did not and still does not pose that great a threat to deserve all this media attention.

Ronald Danreuther explained why there is an inflated focus on international terrorism versus domestic terrorism. Danreuther lists three main reasons :

1. It is instrumental to states to use force against "international" foes
2. It appears glamorous when it's international
3. And finally international terrorism threatens the international system

In the end, all though most panellists believed that media should be reformed they also believed that reform is almost impossible considering the factors presented above by Danreuther.

New Institutions

The second solution, the establishment of institutions was presented by Bartlett. Bartlett argues that the sources of terrorism in the form of domestic and international injustices will continue to exist and the youth will want to deal with them. Our challenge is to recognize that there can be peaceful or violent ways to channel this frustration. Our role is to show them that the peaceful way is more thrilling and more effective.

Instead of banning talk about terrorism we should foster a safe and open environment that would make terrorism less enticing and less alluring. In addition, a peace call for young Muslims to go abroad to work for charities would help channel the frustration in a peaceful and proactive way.

Conclusion

In the opening session Lambert called for an equality of suffering to be respected in the media, by think tanks and by academia in general. To do otherwise is an unethical. Lambert continued to conclude that Lambert said that academics should be braver than we have been to date in promoting their ideas about terrorism, resistance and radicalism. In the aftermath of 9/11 authoritative academic voices were not heard, and one cannot constantly blame the media, there are opportunities were one could have made his voices heard. Otherwise, the danger is that the minority "conservative" opinion will remain disproportionately influential as it is today.

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