

## (Cosmic) War on Terror: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism

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### Abstract

The purpose of our research is to elaborate and understand the causes of terrorism. In a global international arena a central conflict exists between the West (U.S.) and the East (Arab World). It is necessary to analyze the issue of terrorism within this context of conflict between the West vs. East.

Samuel Huntington's famous thesis, *Clash of Civilizations*, defines the basis and preconditions of terrorism. It is within this context that we discuss the topic of terrorism.

Equally important is providing basic information about the history of terrorism, its origins, and identifying the motives, psychological circumstances, and environmental conditions. This provides the framework to understand how terrorists' strategies are formulated.

We examine the term "War on Terror" and its logical consequences; the perception of the other party (of conflict) and try to define religious underpinnings of the conflict and the psychological makeup of a terrorist organization.

**Keywords:** War or Terror, causes of terror, Clash of Civilizations, East vs. West

### Clash of Civilizations

In his book *Clash of Civilizations* Harvard University Eaton Professor Samuel P. Huntington hypothesizes that differences between civilizations are real and important.

As early as 1993, Professor Huntington predicted that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world would not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict would be cultural. The clash of civilizations would be the battle lines of the future. (Huntington, 1993, p. 22)

Conflict between civilizations was the latest phase of the evolution of conflict in the modern world. In 1793, distinguished American historian R. R. Palmer stated, "The war of kings were over; the war of peoples had begun." (Huntington, 1993, p. 23) This nineteenth-century pattern lasted until the end of World War I. Then, as a result of the Russian Revolution and the reaction against it, the conflict of nations yielded to the conflict of ideologies, first among communism, fascism-Nazism, and liberal democracy, and then between communism and liberal democracy. In the last two decades international politics has moved out from its Western phase and its center-piece has become the interaction between the West and non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations as well. (Ibid. p. 23)

During the Cold War the world was divided into the First, Second and Third Worlds. Those divisions are no longer relevant. It is far more meaningful now to group countries not in terms of their political or economic systems or in terms of their level of economic development

but rather in terms of their culture and civilization. (Ibid. p. 23) The reason to this, as some researchers put it (and shown below) may be the fact that the future wars will be fought not on natural resources or territory, but on/between identities. This very argument gains clarity if considered from the two main notions which are actual in the last two decades: *Clash of Civilizations* (S. Huntington) and *The End of History* (F. Fukuyama). The first notion stresses the inevitability of future conflicts between ideology-religious/cultural identities which seems more realistic than the second notion of Francis Fukuyama which predicted the spread of Western Liberal Democracy throughout the world after the end of Cold War.

What do we mean when we talk of a civilization? It is defined by both common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people. (Huntington 1993, p. 24)

As Samuel Huntington explains, the clash of civilizations occurs at two levels. At the micro-level, adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations struggle, often violently, over the control of territory and each other. At the macro-level, states from different civilizations compete for relative military and economic power, struggle over the control of international institutions and third parties, and competitively promote their particular political and religious values. (Huntington 1993, p. 29)

Mr. Huntington clearly states that the differences between civilization/cultural consciousness is increasing.

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The conflict between civilizations supplants ideological and other forms of conflict as the dominant global form of conflict and these clashes between groups in different civilizations is more frequent than it was in the past. Furthermore, these clashes are more sustained and more violent than conflicts between groups in the same civilization. These violent conflicts between groups in different civilizations are the most likely and most dangerous source of escalation that could lead to global wars. (Huntington 1993, p. 48) Our goal is to examine the War on Terror within the context of *Clash of Civilizations* (the conflict between West vs. East).

### Bush's War on Terror

The term "War on Terror" was introduced by former U.S. President George W. Bush. This definition of terror has become an official approach in the West and especially in the United States. (It should be noted that Barack Obama administration refuses to use the term in its official discourse).

During the Bush administration the official discourse of state (officials) gained a binary black and white feature picturing the other part (of conflict) in terms of evil (Bushism's like "Axis of Evil"). This specific feature of an official discourse made a shift towards a primitive good and evil dualism that probably had its negative consequences.

Some researchers note: "The declaration of war on an abstract concept (i.e., terrorism) summarizes some main features of the War on Terrorism script" (Chang and Mehan, 2006 p. 18) It was overly simplistic and created the perception that nations could be divided into two camps, those who aligned themselves with America and were anti-terrorist, and those nations that were against us (voted against the United States in the United Nations over going to war against Iraq), the pro-terrorist nations. While the basic elements of the War on Terrorism script were formed before September 12th, throughout the rest of September 2001, the Bush Administration solidified this script by repeatedly elaborating it. Bush did so primarily by placing specific meanings derived from the War on Terrorism script on a wide range of ambiguous, or sometimes ordinary, events. This discourse strategy was repeated many times. When military actions against the Taliban became tangible, the word "war" was no longer merely a metaphoric expression. Bush's War on Terrorism script translated a war against terrorism from an abstract concept into a war not only against a terrorist group, but also into a war against a state. "(Ibid. p. 18) Presumably Bush adopted a discourse strategy in the face of these empirical ambiguities. He shifted the debate from a legal or rational mode of discourse to a (civil) religious mode of discourse to legitimize his proposed military actions on Afghanistan. (Ibid. p. 18)

### Psychology of Terrorism

America is engaged in wars with several Muslim countries. In his book *How to Win a Cosmic War*, contemporary Iranian-American writer and scholar of religions, Reza Aslan, uses a specific term "Cosmic" to describe the nature of this war in a literary way. According to the author this struggle appears not as a war fought between armies or nations, but between forces of good and evil. (Aslan, 2009, Review) These kinds of Cosmic wars are fought not over land or politics but over identity. The conflicts with Iraq and Afghanistan, according to terminology coined by the Bush administration, make them wars over identity. Official American discourse made a shift towards religious based terminology which was identical to the other parties frame of discourse. Terrorists see and interpret the conflict basically in religious terms. Moreover, terrorist groups such as Al Quaida, and the Taliban view Western military forces in the Middle East as the continuation of the religious wars of the European Crusaders in the Middle Ages.

According to Aslan, there can be no compromise, no negotiation, no settlement, and no surrender in a cosmic war. The jihadists who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001 were fighting a cosmic war. (Aslan, 2009, Review)

Above all, however, it is crucial to know the terrorist mentality. Research conducted by the Professor at the University of Maryland, USA, Arie Kruglanski sheds light on how "collectivist mentality" may play an important role in terrorism. His surveys of thousands of people in 15 Arab and other countries found that Muslims who have a more collective mentality are more likely to support terrorist attacks against Americans than those with more individualistic leanings. (Shoen, 2012) This research, submitted to *Political Psychology*, also found that people reporting less personal success in life had a greater tendency to endorse collective ideas and to support attacks against Americans. (Having said this the economic situation of the terrorists that planned and executed 9/11 were largely middle-class and well educated individuals) The findings suggest that joining terrorist groups may confer a sense of security and meaning that people do not feel as individuals, Kruglanski says "Being part of a collectivist cause has always been a hallmark of people willing to undergo personal sacrifices." (DeAngelis, 2009)

Terrorism researcher Max Taylor argues that: "One big problem with terrorism policy altogether is that it tends to interpret things from our perspective, based on what makes sense to us. That's not really the issue: The issue is what makes sense to people on the ground." (Ibid)

## History of Terrorism

The term terrorism itself is defined as the use of violence and threats to intimidate or coerce, especially for political purposes. (Webster's Collage Dictionary) The historical development of terrorism shows that it is a tool for change. (The History of Terrorism, 2012)

The history of terrorism dates back at least 2000 years when a Jewish resistance group (Zealots) killed Roman soldiers and destroyed Roman property because Rome was demanding that the Jews worship Caesar as a god. At that time Israel was a province of the Roman Empire. From the beginning terrorism and religion were companions. Terrorism against an enemy was a religious act that was considered a good and worthy act. In fact, it was not called "terrorism", they were not terrorists usually they called themselves "freedom fighters", "revolutionaries", "patriots". Modern development of terrorism began during the French Revolution's Reign of Terror (1793-1794). During this period the term terrorism was first coined. (Ibid) Through the past two hundred years terrorism has been used to achieve political ends and has developed as a tool for liberation, oppression, and international global politics.

Americans know that terrorism did not begin on September 11, 2001. The first major terrorist attack on New York City's financial districts did not occur on September 11, or even with the 1993 truck bombing of the World Trade Center. It occurred on September 16, 1920 when anarchists exploded a horse cart filled with dynamite near the intersections of Wall and Broad Streets; it took 40 lives, and about 300 others were wounded. As we look back at history, we find that every time the U.S. has entered into a major military adventure it has been enabled by a dramatic incident that aroused public sentiment overwhelmingly in favor of military action.

American history in the 20th century was already af-

ected by terrorism. For example: The assassination of President William McKinley in 1901, continuing with the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, and the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000. (National Security Strategy for Combating Terrorism, 2003, p. 1)

Americans are not alone in the struggle against terror. The marks made by terrorists are left upon every country in the world, even during the 9/11 attack citizens from some 90 countries died in the Twin Towers of New York City.

After defining terrorism and providing some basics causes of its roots, it is important to elaborate on the causes of this negative social phenomenon. To grasp the magnitude of the threat first we should understand what makes Islamic terrorists tick. (Huckabee, 2008) Besides their mentality what are the circumstances that drive particular social groups to engage in such destructive actions?

Terrorist organizations are diversified in motives, sophistication, and strength, but despite this fact they share a basic structure. At the base of this structure is admitted underlying conditions, poverty, corruption, religious conflict, and ethnic strife which create opportunities for terrorists exploitation. Terrorists use these conditions in order to justify their actions and expand their support, however, some of these conditions are real and some manufactured. The terrorists have a belief that terrorism is a legitimate means to address such conditions and effect political change. These problems further the development and growth of terror.

The international environment, which is located in the structure, defines the boundaries within which terrorists' strategies take shape. Due to free and more open borders, this environment provides access to havens, capabilities, and other supports to terrorists. But access alone is not enough. Terrorists must have a physical base from which to operate. States around the world still offer terrorists ha-

## The Structure of Terror



(National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, 2003, p. 6)

vens, both physical (e.g., safe houses, training grounds) and virtual (e.g., reliable communication and financial networks). Terrorists need all this in order to plan, organize, train, conduct their operations, solidify and expand the organization.

At the top of the structure is leadership. It provides the overall direction and strategy that links all factors. Moreover, the leadership serves as a catalyst for terrorist action. The loss of the leadership can cause many organizations to collapse. They adapt a more decentralized organization, possessing largely autonomous cells and of course these capabilities make challenges even greater.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, to understand the motives and psychological/moral justification of the other party of a conflict is the only way to intelligently address the issue of dealing with terrorist. When expressed in a religious terms, the conflict is being perceived and interpreted on religious ground.

To the Taliban of the world the way the West defines its “War on Terror” reinforces its own view that interprets the ongoing military operation in a religious framework. (i.e. to them it is a religious war).

We contend that the war against terrorism is not a clash of civilizations rather a clash between civilization and those who would destroy it.

Having said that, despite great attempts to overcome this challenge, terrorists still have an image as “heroes” in the public eye, some people still believe that terrorism is a religious act, these “heroes” will have a place in paradise. Unfortunately, this image still dominates in many countries and if it continues to persist the large networks of terrorist organizations will gradually become stronger.

As we see from history – terrorism is used artificially with negative motives and a distorted understanding of history and reality.

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