

The World After 9/11

What Have We Learned

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Abstract

A decade has passed since the attacks of 9/11. The heightened curiosity about terrorism has seen an avalanche of books and articles in recent years. In this article, after tracing the evolution of research in the area of social conflict, in general, and terrorism, in particular, I attempt to understand if the collected wisdom has altered the views of those who make public policies in the US. However, in a rapidly changing world, some of the old theories of mass mobilization are becoming obsolete with equal speed. At a time when ideas can spread across the world in the speed of light through the Internet, we may have to have a different methodology for understanding how political movements are formed and how the government can mitigate the risks of politically motivated violence.

Keywords

Terrorism, leadership, Internet, mobilization, counter-terrorism

Introduction

A decade has passed since the world came to a standstill and watched in horror the scenes of carnage brought about in the name of Islam during the 9/11 attacks. Although, the violence that targets the innocents in the name of a higher cause has been part of many around the world. However, despite the Oklahoma City bombing by a right-wing fanatic in 1995, which was one of the deadliest single attacks in the annals of terrorism, the United States remained largely free of such violence, particularly on its own soil, until 2001. Al-Qaeda had targeted the US directly at least since the early 1990s. It was responsible for the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, downing of the Black Hawk helicopter in Somalia in 1994, the 1998 attacks on the UUS Cole off the coast of Yemen, and the US Embassies in Tanzania and in Kenya. However, it almost seemed preposterous that a relatively small group of men, however determined, could take on the undisputed Superpower of the world. Furthermore, when these attacks were taking place, the nation was distracted by the impeachment procedure of its president for sexual indiscretion. As a result, when the Bush Administration took control, they were nearly oblivious to the plans hatched by a group of exiled men in distant Afghanistan (Bush 2011).

Suddenly, after the attacks, terrorism not only became everyone's business, it became the cornerstone of US foreign and even domestic policy. The 'Bush Doctrine' boldly declared to every nation—'you are with us, or against us'. Two wars were launched in the name of combating terrorism abroad. At the home front, suddenly construction of a multi-billion dollar fence at the US-Mexico border became a political imperative. A mega department on Homeland Security was created. Untold billions were spent by the federal, state, and even local governments in order to offer protection from the terrorists abroad and at home. And, in keeping up with the seemingly insatiable demand for learning about terrorism, publishers began churning out books on terrorism. Today, after ten years, the world is still reeling under the direct and indirect effects of that fateful day. It is important to take stock of where we are in understanding and combating terrorism.

'Terrorism': End of Scholarly Inhibition

The first impact of the 'new' post-9/11 world was the disappearing of the inhibition of using the term 'terrorism' by the academics. In its early stages, terrorism studies had to overcome a deep ideological obstacle. At the end of the twentieth century, while social scientists were rising to the challenges of exploring the root causes of social movements, there was one area within the broad range of conflict studies, where the literature was conspicuous in its near absence—terrorism. With the exception of a few noteworthy efforts, beginning, perhaps with the path breaking work of historian Walter Laqueur (1977), few noted scholars in the field of social sciences had contributed anything on 'terrorism' (Crenshaw 1981; Schmid and de Graaf 1982; Rapoport 1984). This conscious aversion can perhaps be traced directly to the ideological implication of the term. In today's world the term 'terrorist' is seen as moral equivalent of a serial killer. Yet, the term has seen ups and downs of its implications. In the first half of the twentieth century, those who carried out attacks against an unjust colonial system used the name as a badge of honour. During the anti-colonial movement, among most of the native Indians, they were viewed as freedom fighters or revolutionaries. The colonial rulers may have labeled them as 'terrorists' or 'Anarchists' (perhaps a worse epithet then). To my knowledge, there was hardly a debate about the term or any objection to its use by the violent dissidents. In fact, in Tsarist Russia, the Anarchist Vera Zasulich, after attempting to assassinate a notorious police chief in a packed courtroom, threw down her weapon after she shot the man, proudly proclaiming that she was not a criminal, but a 'terrorist' (Bergman 1983). With time, however, public perception, and the connotation of the term began changing. Menachem Begin, the later elected Prime Minister of Israel and held as a 'terrorist' by the authorities in the British Mandated Palestine, was the first to renounce it by calling the occupying British authorities the 'real terrorists' (Begin 1951).

There was yet another important reason for scholars to avoid the morally loaded term. The Oxford English Dictionary gives two definitions for terrorism—(a) 'government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the Revolution of 1789–94' and (b) 'policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted'. The first definition clearly associates the term with organized state, while the second offers a very broad characterization, which can include both state and non-state actors. The reason for this duality is of course, is the fact that the term was coined after the

French Revolution, when the revolution began to turn on its own (as many changes of government through violent means do) and started the 'reign of terror' (Hoffman, 1998). Therefore, the first defined act of terrorism was carried out by the government against its own people. In fact, there is no doubt about the fact that if morality of action can be measured by the number of deaths, the actions of organized states have caused many multiples of fatalities than any dissident group in history (Rummel 1997).

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the first debate that took place in the field of terrorism studies was about its definition. Without an accepted definition scholars, journalists, and government agencies defined the term in their own way. In a seminal contribution to the emerging debate Schmid and Jongman (1988) published a study, which methodically examined over 100 definitions of terrorism and attempted a synthesis. Despite the heroic effort by the duo, terrorism remained a controversial term. Summarising continuing controversy, two decades later, the noted sociologist Charles Tilly observed, 'Some vivid terms serve political and normative ends admirably despite hindering description and explanation of the social phenomena at which they point... They... include *terror*, *terrorism*, and *terrorists*' (Tilly 2004).

To avoid the moral ambiguity, many scholars either avoided the term altogether or chose to broaden the definition of terrorism to an extent that it lost its specific meaning. Hence, it is no surprise that those who were the first to explicitly address the topic of terrorism, often disregarding its political implications, were parts of think tanks and other organizations associated with the government or the intelligence community instead of academic institutions (Wilkinson 1974, 1977; Freedman and Alexander 1983; Jenkins 1985; Hoffman 1998; Gunaratna 2002).

The big change, however, came after the 9/11 attacks. The reluctance of academics to tackle this politically loaded subject simply disappeared after the devastating attacks. The number of books and articles on terrorism in the past decade alone is many times of the number published in the previous fifty years. Today, trying to get our arms around this vast literature is akin to attempting to have a drink at the mouth of fire hose. As we witnessed the burning towers and the hapless victims jumping to their death after the second airplane plowed into the Tower in full view of the cameras, the second big change came, as a result of the most obvious question that was on everybody's mind, 'why?'

Searching for the 'Root Causes'

Scrambling for answers, the media, the political leaders, and the opinion-makers turned to two seemingly apparent explanations for terrorism in general, and acts of ultimate self-sacrifice, suicide attacks, in particular.

The Insanity Defence

Confusion about the motives of these actors was pervasive at the sight of the horrific attacks of the 9/11. Reflecting the widespread view of the 'mad men of history', Senator John Warner, the then Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee commented, 'Those who would commit suicide in their assault on the free world are not rational' (Atran 2003). The accusation of insanity, however, obviates the need of causal explanations of the violent actions. The argument that the terrorists suffer from psychological

problem or some kind of personality disorder has been put to rest by trained psychiatrists and psychologists from diverse parts of the world for nearly three decades (Post 1979, 1990; Post, Sprinzak and Denny 2003; Taylor 1988; Taylor and Quayle 1994; Maccauley 2007; Horgan 2005a, 2005b; Silke 2003). None of the credible observations of terrorist personalities and behaviour yields any reason to believe that the common foot soldiers fighting organised societies are psychologically different from the rest of the population. In fact, while there may be doubts about some of the leaders' states of mind, the followers, by and large, seem to be free of diagnosable maladies of the mind (Post 2004).

Social Structural Factors

With insanity eliminated as an explanation, the other often cited reasons for terrorism and political violence are the various manifestations of social structural imbalance. The reasoning for this line of argument is simple—these structural imbalances, such as poverty, lack of education, blocked economic opportunities, income inequality, or lack of political freedom prevent people from achieving their fullest. Inability to achieve what people believed to be their rightful entitlement creates frustration and anger, which lead to violent acts of political protest. Echoing this view, after the 9/11 attacks a number of prominent politicians and political decision makers almost reflexively pointed toward social structural imbalances of all sorts as generators of violence. Thus, Laura Tyson (2001), the former Chief of Presidential Council of the Economic Advisors under the Clinton Administration called for a Marshall Plan as a part of a frontal assault on terrorism. The former South Korean President and the Nobel Peace Prize winner Kim Dae-Jung, in his acceptance speech, clearly stated that 'At the bottom of terrorism is poverty' (quoted in Maleckova 2005).

The assertion that poverty and economic deprivation cause terrorism has a long history and is based on one simple idea—it is a nearly universally accepted assumption of human behaviour that aggression is the outcome of frustration. When we do not obtain something to which we feel entitled, we feel anger and frustration, which, in turn, lead to violent actions aimed at removing the obstacles to our achievement. When we are horrified by acts of terrorism, by drawing this simple chain of causality we attempt to explain the motivations of those who carry these out. It is no wonder that millennia before psychologist John Dollard (1939) and his research team published their influential book linking frustration and anger resulting from social structural strains to aggressive behaviour, Aristotle famously pronounced, 'poverty is the parent of revolution and crime'. Since the time of Aristotle most of us have taken for granted the link between the gaps in the social fabric and political violence. In fact, looking at the mindless loss of non-combatant lives from attacks by sub-national groups, one can reach one of two conclusions these are the work of insane minds or, that those who perpetrated the attacks have little to live for. These associations are reinforced when we come to the most puzzling of the attacks, where the perpetrators willingly sacrifice their own lives to kill others.

The long, circuitous path of scholarship that links Aristotle to Karl Marx to the sociologists of the 1960s had uniformly looked at the wrinkles in the social structure as the primary generators of political malevolence. Karl Marx saw a binary world divided between the rapacious bourgeoisie and the proletariat, who are alienated by the lack of control over their own fruits of labour. The rise of Communist and socialist-led revolts around the world reinforced belief in the direct causal connection between a shared feeling of deprivation and rebellion.

The social structural theory received a boost in the 1950s and early 1960s with contributions from a number of prominent sociologists, such as Coser (1958), Dahrendorf (1958) and Smelser (1963). Among these authors, Smelser, perhaps offered the most comprehensive theory of mass movements. He argued, inter alia, that structural strains felt within a society add to the ‘generalized belief’ of protest, which brings about social upheavals. As examples, Smelser cited cases from prerevolutionary Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam and many other third world countries.

In the immediate aftermath of WWII, the United States was flushed with a total victory in a war that was almost unanimously seen as the quintessential battle between good and evil, and the nation began relishing its status as a ‘superpower’. This lack of moral ambiguity continued during the height of the Cold War days. As the country basked in its self-perception of being at the pinnacle of military, economic, and political power, American social science scholarship in the post-WWII social sciences remained largely self-congratulatory. Violence was seen as an outcome of institutional and social structural imperfections found only in so-called ‘Third World’ nations. In the democratic West, common citizens were thought to be empowered by their ability to voluntarily form lobbying groups and to change the offending social order thereby, eliminating the need for violent revolutions. Yet reality stood in the way of this rosy requiem of social conflict in the West in the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of this incongruity, the prominent political scientist Harry Eckstein lamented (1964, 1) ‘When today’s social science has become intellectual history, one question will certainly be asked about it: why did social science, which had produced so many studies on so many subjects, produce so few on violent political disorder?’

The conundrum for social scientists in the 1960s and 70s was that the fires of protest were burning brightly in the cities of North America and Western Europe, where the gradually rising tide of economic prosperity had made life easier for most. To solve this riddle, a group of political scientists offered the ‘relative deprivation’ theory. The proponents of this theory argued that violence was taking place in the affluent nations because aggressive behavior is not generated by the presence of absolute poverty but of its relative perception (Gurr 1968, 1970).

Hence, the Western sociological scholarship had singled out factors of economic deprivation as one of most important factors in explaining conflict. However, some others pointed toward a ‘freedom deficit’ as the true ‘root cause’ of terrorism. Thus, President George W. Bush emphatically told the nation, ‘They (the terrorists) hate us for our freedom’, and proclaimed democracy as the antidote for terrorism. Once again, the Western world, hungry for an answer, quickly agreed. The Bush foreign policy, particularly one that justified the Iraq invasion when no weapons of mass destruction was found, immediately framed it as a means of spreading democracy as a response to the ‘Global War on Terror’.

The Empirical Evidence

While good theories may make compelling intellectual arguments, scientific methodology requires empirical evidence with observed data. The problem with terrorism research in the aftermath of 9/11 was that there was no credible set of data. There were a few for-profit organizations collecting data primarily for risk assessment for private corporations interested in investing abroad. Yet, there was no scholarly oversight of the data and sometimes they reflected the ideological biases of the collector. As a result, Gupta (2006) argued that social science research often become victims of the ‘tyranny of data’. The

problem of theory building regarding the root causes political violence has always been that there were very little quantitative data on conflict. This situation changed radically in the 1970s, when, in response to widespread violence, which touched North America and Western Europe, the US government decided to fund a number of data gathering projects (Singer 1963; Feierabend, Fierabend and Nesvold 1969; Banks 1971; Taylor and Hudson 1971; Taylor and Hudson 1971, 1972 [2nd ed.], Taylor and Michael Jodice 1982; Gurr, *Minorities at Risk*). These datasets, however, collected information at national level on various types of violence, such as riots, protest demonstration, coup de-etats, assassinations, etc. They also collected data on the number of fatalities. These data collection efforts, however for the above stated reason, did not feature terrorism. In any case, thanks to the collection of data on mass movements, a number of statistical studies quickly put proffered theories to test and amassed an impressive list of publications (Hibbs 1970; Gupta 1990).

While the scholarly community in social sciences became interested in the analyses of social violence, another significant change in the political landscape was afoot, which affected the data gathering effort. The passage of the Civil Rights legislation and the end of the Vietnam War considerably lowered tension in the United States. Consequently, by the late 1980s interest in conflict waned and with it, the public funding for data collection.¹

As violence from leftist groups, which grabbed the most public attention, ebbed in the 1990s, a new wave of worldwide violence was about to strike, which caught the nation largely unprepared. These movements were based on religious and racist identities. The conflict that engulfed the nation did not come from outside. The homegrown movements, often broadly referred to as the 'militia' or the 'Christian Identity' movement targeted abortion clinics, symbols of state authorities, or members of minority communities. From Waco, Texas to Ruby Ridge, Montana, spectacular clashes with these groups started becoming increasingly commonplace. However, the most devastating attack from rightwing violence came in 1995, when a building housing a number federal agencies, was blown up in Oklahoma City. With this devastating attack, public attention quickly shifted from urban riots and mass movements to the threats of terrorism. While the data collection in the previous decades centered on nations and involved various manifestations of mass movements, the latest efforts concentrated on individual groups and their activities. A federally funded web site, the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) was set up under the supervision of RAND Corporation. Soon thereafter came the 9/11 attacks. Sensing the need for consistent data on terrorist groups and their followers MIPT was phased out and a new National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism (START) was established at the University of Maryland, from which scholars could download publicly available information for free.²

Along with the collection of aggregate data, a number of federal agencies and their affiliate organizations—from the National Science Foundation, and US Institute of Peace to the agencies related to defense and homeland security—began sponsoring individual researchers to study specific groups or its members. Their collective effort significantly advanced our understanding of the root causes of terrorism and political violence.

Evidence and Confusion

The accumulated macro and micro data on terrorism offered a new challenge to the social science theory builders. It was quickly realised that the link between frustration felt at a societal level and demonstration

of anger is not automatic (Krueger and Maleckova 2003). By casting a cursory look, we can clearly see that none of the 9/11 attackers came from an impoverished background. In fact, some came from the wealthier segments of their countries of origin. Several, including the supposed leader of the group, Mohammed Atta, were highly educated individuals. Similarly, Umar Farouk Abdulmutalab, the so-called 'Underwear bomber', came from a highly privileged Nigerian family. As did Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistan-born US citizen, who attempted to plant a bomb in the middle of the Time Square. Those who examined the question of the individual participants' socioeconomic background in a systematic way have generally found that the participants tend to be better educated and from higher economic class than the rest of the population (Hassan 2001; Bueno de Mesquita 2003). These findings may reflect a selection bias, particularly when a large pool of motivated volunteers is available for the group to choose from. In such cases, it is likely that the best educated and the best-trained ones, who can fit in with the target population, will be chosen. In contrast, when the pool of volunteers is comprised of poor and uneducated, and the target population is demographically similar to the terrorist group's, it is likely that the attackers are not going to be different from the rest of the population. Thus, in areas where there is domestic insurgency, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and India, the terrorists may be drawn from the poor and uneducated lot.

If the micro-level evidence point to a confusing pattern, so does the macro-level evidence. A number of careful studies did not find any direct correlation between terrorism and structural factors, such as per capita GDP, education, or poverty (Krueger and Leitin 2008). Scatter plots and simple regression equations corroborate the results of the previous studies (Gupta 2008). Even democracy and political freedom produced but a weak correlation with violent rebellion. Only the index of state failure showed a strong correlation with incidents of terrorism (ibid.). Thus, after an exhaustive examination, Krueger and Laitin concluded that 'To sum up, our data analysis up until now confirms...that the economic foundations of terrorism are at best only indirect' (Kruger and Leitin 2008, 178).

The Leadership Issue

I began my discussion by arguing that there can be two possible explanations of terrorism—insanity or factors social structural imbalances. We saw that there is no evidence that at least the followers in a violent dissident movement suffer from any mental illness or exhibit any specific personality type. In their psychological makeup, they are indistinguishable for the rest of the community. Hence, it must be the grievances. Once again, the data analysed clearly show a muddled picture. If the most potent generators of grievances, such as poverty, unemployment, income inequality, even lack of political freedom can explain cross-national variations of terrorism, then how do we explain it?

When terrorists are interviewed, they all talk about their resentment toward the extant political system; they complain about all the factors of structural imbalance. They speak of lack of economic opportunities; they speak of injustice, discrimination, repression, and intolerance. Why then these factors do not show up in empirical analyses? I posit that without grievances there can be no political movement. However, these grievances only serve as the necessary conditions. This is because none of these movements reflect spontaneous explosions of anger and frustration. The reason that they don't is because they

come up against the irrefutable logic of the collective action problem, first demonstrated by Mancur Olson (1968). That is, all political movements, in the end, aim at attaining public goods that are to be distributed within the community regardless of participation by others. In a dissident movement, until it gains a certain amount of momentum or public support, the costs imposed by the organized society fall primarily on those, who are the first ones to openly express their disaffection for the established system. Therefore, every 'rational' member of the community would wait for some people to stick their necks out. With everyone behaving rationally, no movement would ever start.

This collective action problem cannot be solved within the strict framework of economics. Olson was clear in arguing that the reason someone would assume the risk of being a dissident is a matter of social psychology and not of economics (*ibid.*, 161–162). Therefore, I argue that in order to fully understand the motivations behind mass movement in general and terrorism in particular, we must expand the fundamental assumption of economic rationality to include the group (Gupta 1990, 2008). That is, as social beings, we all strive to maximise not just the utility of our own selves, but also that of the group, in which claim our membership. Hoffman (1998, 43) is therefore correct in stating that 'The terrorist is fundamentally an altruist: he believes in serving a "good" cause designed to achieve a *greater good for a wider constituency*' (emphasis mine). Since economics and 'rational choice' models cannot fully explain altruism, for an explanation of such behaviour, we must look outside the disciplines that equate rationality with selfishness (Rose-Ackerman 1996).

Although evolutionary logic has imbued us with the inescapable need to belong to groups, yet our choice of groups is not automatic; it depends on the work of leaders, we may call 'political entrepreneurs'. The economist Joseph Schumpeter (1912, 1939 [English Translation]) pointed out that market interactions alone do not explain long-term movements in the economy. He emphasised the work of entrepreneurs, who through their innovations cause economic evolution. Similarly, some scholars emphasised the need to have 'political entrepreneurs' to provide a shape of collective identity for a movement to start and sustain. These are the leaders, the Mohandas Gandhis, the V.I. Lenins, the Maos, the Martin Luther King Jr, and the bin Ladens of the world, who are able to channelise the collective anger felt within their community to create a full-fledged political movement. Hence, the presence of grievances is only the necessary cause for political violence, for sufficient cause, we must look for leadership. Because of this intervening factor of leadership, when we examine the data we can only find a weak correlation between the structural factors and political violence.

Finally, I should mention that terrorism is widely recognized today, not as a separate form of political violence. If we define it as attacks on non-combatant population, then we must view it as a strategy employed by the group leadership. The most obvious manifestation of this strategic use of violence can be seen in the orchestration of suicide attacks. Despite the apparent implication of extreme emotion, a number of studies have found that suicide attacks are exquisitely timed to achieve certain political goals for the dissident group (Kydd and Walter 2002; Berrebi and Klor 2003; Pape 2003; Gupta and Mundra 2005; Hafez 2007).

Rise of Leaders: Accident of History?

Although Schumpeter introduced the concept of entrepreneurs—those rare individuals, who can take the existing innovations and advances in technologies and can create large enterprises that can move an

economy (or the global economy) along—what he did not address was the question, why do these entrepreneurs arrive on the global stage from certain countries at specific periods of time. The noted economist William Baumol (1990) attempted to answer this important question by arguing that it is the incentive structure within the structure of an economy that creates what he calls, ‘productive’, ‘unproductive’ or even ‘destructive’ entrepreneurs. Baumol, of course, does not examine the case of radical political leaders, but he argues that ‘while the total supply of entrepreneurs varies among societies, the productive contribution of the society’s entrepreneurial activities varies much more because of their allocation between productive activities such as innovation and largely unproductive activities such as rent seeking or organized crime’ (ibid. 893). He establishes his hypotheses by drawing historical examples from Ancient Rome and China, Middle Ages in Europe and the Renaissance. Baumol points out that a society that provides incentives for creative activities, which may go against the accepted norms, practices, and ideologies, help supply crops of creative entrepreneurs, while those that develop institutional restrictions on free ideas, tend to produce unproductive or destructive entrepreneurs. We can extend his logic to see that the Arab/Islamic nations have largely been non-democratic, where the only expression of even moderate dissent or expression of frustration can take place within the confines of religious discourse. As a result these societies have channelised their frustration, anger, and a perception of humiliation through religious fundamentalism. Even in the democratic societies in the West, the hysteria created by the 9/11 and other attacks and a prolonged involvement in warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan have isolated Muslim youths—particularly in the Western European nations, such as France, the UK, Spain, and even in the US (Sageman 2008). This has created conditions where radicalisation of the youth can take place. It is therefore, of little surprise that these countries have produced the leaders of the next generation of al-Qaeda.

The Deep Pocket and Bully Pulpit

If opportunities create leaders, there is another important aspect of their rise; money and visibility. Both are necessary for communicating with a large number of people. It is often assumed that given the right set of circumstances, organised protests, violent or otherwise would rise spontaneously. Similar to the prairie fire they would quickly engulf an entire region. Yet, when we study mass movements more carefully—from large and small—we find that the presence of prominent people, kings, priests, cultural and religious icons have played the roles of catalysts throughout history. Without the active patronage of Asoka the Great, Buddhism might not have its global spread; without the conversion of Emperor Constantine, Christianity might have remained a quaint Jewish sect, appealing mostly to the lowest classes of the poor and the immigrants in the Roman Empire. If Prophet Mohammed were not a king or was defeated in the unequal Battle of Badr, world’s history might have changed. Even in today’s seemingly political movements we see the impact of people of influence. This influence can come from their social positions or from their wealth. Thus, in the United States, the sudden rise of the Tea Party movement after the election of President Barak Obama in 2008, can be traced to money spent by the billionaire Koch family channeled through myriad conservative think tanks and political arms of the Republican Party (Mayer 2010).

This supposition of the importance of money and power in the spread of an idea is very well recognised in the current terrorism literature (Napoleoni 2005). Money flowing from Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries help fund Al-Qaeda. The benevolence of the US to the *mujahideens* during the first Afghan War also helped al-Qaeda and the Talibans (Sageman 2008). Similarly Pakistani financial support has been a major factor in promoting and propagating groups, such as Lask-e-Taiba (Shahzad 2011; Constable 2011).

How the World has Changed

In sum, we can conclude that since the 9/11 attacks the Western world began recognising the threat from terrorism and started efforts to understand its root causes. Let us now see what implications this accumulated knowledge and awareness has for public policies to deal with terrorism. This, however, does not necessarily imply that the policy-makers have been convinced of the outlines of my argument. What it does imply is that the nature of debate within the policy-making community is increasingly taking these factors into account.

Understanding the Importance of Ideas

The killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen committed to wage jihad against his own country brought the debate to the fore. Unlike bin-Laden, who took an active role in planning the 9/11 attacks, al-Awlaki never participated directly in any attack. His role was to inspire Muslim men to engage the US in violent combats. Although there is evidence that he met at least two of the 9/11 hijackers (Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar) and perhaps had blessed Major Nidal Hassan- who opened fire on fellow servicemen in Fort Hood, Texas, Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalib, the so-called ‘Underwear bomber’, and Faisal Shahzad, the Time-square bomber; there is no evidence that he ordered these attacks. Yet, the fact that he was targeted for a drone attack, which was authorised by President Obama clearly indicates that the US Armed Forces and the highest levels of administration understood the importance of the fact that those who inspire are as equally culpable as those who take part in an actual attack. It naturally poses as a thorny issue for the Western societies, built squarely on the rights of free speech to single out targets based on their pronouncements and not action. Without getting into the morality of the act, it is clear that a decade ago, such an action might have been much more difficult to support both in front of the public as well as the US judicial system. However, as we better understand the power of ideas in mobilising people, policies to curb hate speeches are increasingly gaining grounds.

Understanding the Danger of Playing with Fire

One man’s terrorist may be another man’s freedom fighter, but it is also true that one state’s terrorists are another state’s foreign policy assets. That is why the United Nations has not been able to define and outlaw ‘terrorism’. It is not just the vagueness of the term that has precluded the world body from coming

to a common understanding of what it is. For, in the past, nearly every nation has been able to define vacuous terms and have collectively accepted the Geneva Accord of Prisoners of War (adopted in 1929 and updated in 1949), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). They have been able to nearly pass the Kyoto Protocol on climate change (1997). However, no such movement has been started in defining terrorism and prohibiting states from supporting these groups as a part of a concerted effort by all the nations in the world. The primary reason for this collective inability is that terrorism is indeed a political term and that most governments have often used it to promote their domestic and foreign policy agendas. And, just as often their efforts have produced the monster that had attacked its own creator. The Islamic fundamentalist movement that we see today targeting the United States and Saudi Arabia can trace their origin these nations' enthusiastic embrace of the *Mujahideens* fighting the Soviet military in Afghanistan (Crile 2007). Indira Gandhi had supported Bhindranwale for domestic political reasons and paid for it with her life (Tully and Jacob 1985). Successive Indian governments have aided the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka. Rajiv Gandhi probably fell victim to this failed policy.³ Similarly, today Pakistan is paying dearly for its support of violent insurgencies (Constable 2011). Yet, there is hardly an appetite for the UN to tackle the issue other than in a case-by-case manner.

Foreign Policy and Military Response

Ten years after the US invaded first Afghanistan and then Iraq, the support for the continuing wars in the nation. Today by a very large majority, not only the general population but also the veterans do not believe that the wars were 'worth the sacrifice.'⁴ Yet, when George W. Bush announced his invasions plans, particularly, of Afghanistan, his popularity soared to an unprecedented 80 per cent (Gupta 2008). The military brass was equally confident —They could simply carry out the President's wish to 'root out' the terrorists and come back home with minimum loss of lives and resources. After spending well over a trillion dollars and losing thousands of lives in death and injuries, today at least the military understands the pitfalls of using ground forces to solve a social problem (Bilme and Stilitz 2008). Thus, David Ingatius (2011), in his column 'An Admiral's Farewell' puts it the best:

Talking to (the retiring) Ad. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in his final weeks in the job, I found myself wondering if we are entering a 'post military' age, when our top officers understand that the biggest problems can't be solved with military power.

Limits of Power

Psychologists tell us that when faced with a sudden shock, we often respond with 'cognitive narrowing'; we miss the bigger picture of the origins of the assault and concentrate on the most immediate cause. Similarly, when a nation faces an audacious attack by a small band of people, we, as a nation, tend to lose focus. In the perceived need to punish the offender, nations often take the most simplistic route of a military action. The two wars that began after the 9/11 attacks enjoyed unprecedented public support in the US. A decade later as the nation faces the true costs of these foreign adventures, the buyer's remorse is

palpable (Bilmes and Stiglitz 2008). Once again, public memory is typically short. When there is a next attack, as they are most certain to take place, the public sentiment will once more be aroused; most strident voices would surely call for decisive military actions.

Why Terrorism Succeeds and Fails

After the 9/11 attacks, a sense of pessimism settled on parts of the intellectual world. The noted Harvard law professor, Alan Dershowitz (2003) published a book, whose name belies its conclusion—*Why Terrorism Works*. The title of the book presupposes the fact that terrorism does work and terrorists often get their way. In contrast, by looking at the recent history of violent uprisings and terrorism, another group of scholars argue that terrorism rarely succeed in achieving their political goals (Abrams 2006; Stoker 2007). Yet, when we examine the cases of terrorism over a much broader period of time, we clearly see a pattern emerging. I have argued that all terrorist groups aim at advancing their short and long-term aims through their actions that combine violence with theater (Gupta 2008). Their short-term goals include their desire to publicise their grievances, increase their ‘market share’ of popular support from within their political base, changing of a particular law, or most importantly, induce overreaction from the government in order to push the fence-sitters from their community to join forces with them. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the terrorist groups are bale to achieve their near-term goals. However, when it comes to their long-term objective of establishing new independent states or radically change the social and political institutions of a nation, their claims have mixed results. If we go back in the history of terrorism—I have discussed this on these pages—we find that since 1880s, there have been four large waves of terrorism to the hit the world, of which the first three lasted approximately 40 years each (Gupta 2009). According to Rapoport (2005), the first international wave of terrorism to inundate the world was inspired by the anarchist ideology. After this wave disappeared after the WWI, the second wave of anti-colonialism began and lasted till about the middle of 1950s when most of the former colonies gained independence. The third wave of ‘new left’ movement began in the 1960s and died down around 1990s, when a new wave of religious fundamentalism began. If we examine the successes of these movements to achieve their long-term political goals, we see that only the second wave of anti-colonialism succeeded in achieving their political goals. It seems that terrorism and violent uprisings succeed when those holding power lose their political will or their ability to wars on the insurgents. Thus, in the modern times, United States had to accept defeat in Vietnam and retreat from Iraq with the job of securing peace and stability half finished. From all indications, the same fait awaits the US intervention in Afghanistan. On the other hand, over sixty years of violent uprisings have done little to weaken Israel’s resolve—India still has a strong grip on Kashmir, and the Sri Lankan government, after a devastating civil war was able to achieve a military victory over the Tamil Tigers (LTTE).

New Reality and a Brand New World

There was no Internet when al-Qaeda started. But the basic facts of how to mobilise people remain the same. A decade has passed since the world came to a standstill and watched in horror the scenes of

carnage brought about in the name of Islam during the 9/11 attacks. The violence that targets the innocent in the name of a higher cause has continued to rock the world. As a result, accounts of mass killings have become staples of daily news programs.

In all of these cases, we see the angry faces of the assassins, who proclaim revenge for the past wrongs. Yet, when it comes to killing of those against whom we do not have personal grievances, it is the fear that motivates us. When we fear a loss of status, position of privilege, or religious, cultural and racial distinctiveness, we react violently against whom we perceive to be their cause. It was this fear of the emergence of the African Americans as a social, political, and economic force that gave birth to the KKK at the time of Reconstruction in the American South. A famous study found a compelling (inverse) correlation between cotton prices in the American South and the frequency of lynching in the 1930s (Dollard et al. 1939). The Nazi hatred of the Jews was built upon their existential fear of losing everything German. The mutual fear between the Protestants and the Catholics in Northern Ireland created the decades long ‘troubles’, which claimed hundreds of lives. When we listen to any sermon by the likes of Osama bin Laden, we hear the same message of Islam being under threat of extinction. Such fears motivated Anders Breivik in Norway and Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City. They believed that their world was in peril and what they did in defense of their country, culture and religion simply had to be done. It is this primal fear of the ‘others’, which caused havoc in past, and if history is any guide, it will continue to do so in the future.

Irrational as it may seem, this fear is inherently linked to the very essence of what makes us humans. However, when we see these acts of mindless carnage, some argue that these are random acts carried out by specific individuals. Yet, research points out that these are the results of some very specific causes, which are often reinforced by a changing world. Throughout history, times of profound change have produced mass violence.

Today the world is convulsing with economic and demographic changes. For nearly a decade a persistent global recession had kept us tightly in its grip. The resulting anxiety, similar to events in the past has generated conditions for violence. Another extremely important factor leading to stress is the fear of losing a dominant status in the society. The rapid increases in demographic shifts are fueling anger and suspicion in nearly every corner of the world, especially in the developed nations.

The rise of Western cultural values is similarly rocking the more traditional parts of the Islamic world. There is no question that values of individual freedom are inimical to fundamentalist view of every religion including Islam. As technology and scientific knowledge permeates every society, it is natural for the religious literalists to fear the worst.

Ideas—good or evil—however, do not spread spontaneously. They require leadership, often backed by deep pockets of financial support. When messages of threat from an overarching enemy resonate with a large number of people, a movement of violence is born.

In the past it took time for ideas to crystallise, germinate, and to disseminate. The Internet, however, is changing this basic equation of global spread of ideas. These days, a movement can begin quickly and spread with alarming speed. As we applaud the so-called ‘Arab Spring’—popular uprisings in the Middle East against the entrenched power—we should remember that it is a double-edged sword. In fact, through the Internet Andres Breivik, the Norwegian mass murderer also drew inspiration from right-wing fanatic anti-Muslim writers from all over the world including some from India. As a result, it is easy to see why the coming years portend to have promises of fear and hope, which are likely to destabilise the world with rapid regularity.

As we remember the somber day, we must ponder what can we do about this ominous trend? How can we separate the good from the harmful without trampling on the free flow of ideas on which rests the very essence of the modern civilisation? Similar to many profound questions in life, there is no simple answer. However, wherever the answer lies, it must begin with the right questions aimed at understanding how destructive ideas spread around the world and how we can overcome our instinct to follow the pied pipers of primal fear.

Notes

1. Apart from publicly funded databases, there were a few privately collected, member-based datasets that were available to the researchers. Among these, the most significant is the ITERATE (<http://library.duke.edu/data/collections/iterate.html>).
2. See START website (<http://www.start.umd.edu/start/>).
3. The Jain Commission report.
4. Retrieved 5 October 2011, from http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/category/us_politics/public_opinion_polls/

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