

Terrorism and Globalization

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Abstract

This article analyses the dissemination of terrorist attacks by Islamic Jihadist groups in different countries as a phenomenon connected to the process of globalization. It aims to understand these attacks not only as a reaction to fundamentalist political-religious groups against the Democratic and Christian West or as an epiphenomenon of the 'clash of civilizations.' I argue that the understanding of these attacks involves a complex set of historical and political factors, both secular and contemporary, which has been reinforced and potentialized by European and North American military intervention in the last few decades. Furthermore, the lack of access to human rights is an increasingly disrupting factor in international politics and economics as the effects of globalization have encompassed a weaker position of workers everywhere increasing discrimination and ethnic-cultural oppression. Therefore, globalization has indirectly incentivized the re-emergence of conservative nationalist ideologies, religious fundamentalism, and other intolerant or anti-humanist movements. In this context, the persistence of Islamic jihad groups and the electoral successes of extreme right-wing political parties in Europe can be seen as different manifestations of the same underlying problem.

Keywords: Terrorism; Islamism; colonialism; globalization; national states.

1. Introduction

Recent terrorist attacks by Islamic State (IS) and similar groups, like Al Qaeda, Taliban, Al Nusra, Al Shabaab, Ansar al-Sharia and Boko Haram in countries as diverse as Spain, England, Belgium, France, the US, Turkey, Lebanon, Mali, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Kenya, Somalia, and Nigeria, have shocked the world and received widespread media coverage. These events should not be considered – as many ideologists and governments currently classify terrorism in the name of Islam – as a reaction of fundamentalist factions in the Muslim world against the established power of the Christian democratic West, nor even as a manifestation of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations." This is an incomplete view, which is why this research aims to explore some of the driving forces behind modern day terrorism through the analysis of a complex web of historical and political factors stretching from the distant past into the present.

2. Historical-political problems

In order not to make an exhaustive historical analysis, we depart from the last decades of the 19th century, when global capitalism entered a new phase marked by liberal principles such as 'unregulated markets' and 'free competition.' One of its main characteristics refers to the colonial expansion, aimed to open up new markets for consumer goods and investments and to obtain raw materials to fuel industrial expansion in the center. "Between 1876 and 1915, about one quarter of the globe's land surface was distributed or redistributed as colonies among a half-dozen states." Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy and the US organized a territorial division of the world "into a set of formal and informal colonies and spheres of influence" (Hobsbawm 1989: 59-61).

In some parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia with a predominantly Muslim population, British and French intrusion was felt the most, as the rise of these European powers coincided with the gradual weakening of the Ottoman Empire, which had dominated most of the Middle East until the First World War (1914-1918).

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Even before the conflict ended, Britain and France had divided the Middle East into areas of influence in the secret Sykes – Picot agreements (1916). France, which already controlled the Maghreb, got Syria and Lebanon, whereas Britain extended its power over Egypt and Sudan, the Arab Peninsula, Palestine, and Iraq, in the form of direct colonial governance or protectorates.

“The First World War ended with the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire. Out of the ruins of the empire a new independent state of Turkey emerged, but the Arab provinces were placed under British and French control; the whole of the Arabic-speaking world was now under European rule, except for parts of the Arabian peninsula” (Hourani 2002: 164). Between 1920 and 1940, European powers redrew the borders in the Middle East, thus creating previously non-existent states. This creation of artificial countries without any shared history, traditions or internal cohesion by external actors would have serious long-term socio-political consequences.

In some cases, power was attributed to tribes and nomadic clans from the desert through the establishment of theocratic monarchies based on invented royal dynasties and institutions that appeared exotic or even bizarre for local standards. These newly formed elites received protection from Britain, France, and the US in exchange for their allegiance to Western petrol and arms industry interests. In northern and north-eastern Africa and south-central Asia, a similar process occurred, which gave rise to a number of governments with reduced legitimacy and oppressive, iniquitous, tyrannical or autocratic regimes. Throughout the region, this policy has generated a climate of permanent instability and persistent ethnic, religious and political conflicts.

These tensions and antagonisms are, at the same time, fuelled by many other reasons, such as the rise of nationalism, religious-political fundamentalism, and the continuing Arab-Israeli conflict, all of which are permeated by the echoes of the Cold War. In response to the political dominance and economic exploitation by the Western capitalist nations, a nationalist project with elements of state socialism called Pan-Arabism emerged in the Middle East in the 1950s and 60s. Examples of this are the Egyptian Nasserism and the Algerian Liberation Front. As a result, several one-party states, usually in the form of military dictatorships, were born, such as Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952), Syria (Hafez Al-Assad, 1970), Iraq (Saddam Hussein, 1969) and Libya (Muammar Al-Khadafi, 1969).

In synchrony with these events, a political-religious movement based on fundamentalist and regressive principles surged in the 1960s. This movement, originated from the Muslim Brotherhood founded in Egypt in 1928, proposed the resurrection of the Islamic Caliphate through a jihad (holy war against the heretics in defense of Islamic principles), fought by groups of combatants “prepared for violence and martyrdom” called mujahedin (Hourani, 2002, 446). Persecuted by the Egyptian government, the fundamentalist movement found refuge and finance in the ultraconservative Saudi monarchy, which consented with the diffusion of fundamentalist principles and doctrines through madrassas following the Wahhabism, the state religion in Saudi Arabia.

“Islam could provide an effective language of opposition: to western power and influence, and those who could be accused of being subservient to them; to governments regarded as corrupt and ineffective, the instruments of private interests, or devoid of morality; and to a society which seemed to have lost its unity with its moral principles and direction” (Hourani 2002: 451).

Finally, another element of instability in the region has been the constant state of conflict between Arabs and Jews since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. The way in which the Jewish-Palestinian question was conducted by the international community was strongly influenced by the Cold War logic and its subsequent division of the Middle Eastern region into spheres of geopolitical influence by the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union. This, in addition to the influence of sectarian and messianic ideologies, has been a major cause of perturbation in the region and, as such, a breeding ground for terrorism.

Despite all these tensions and paradoxes, states and legitimate government powers, usually non-democratic, have been able to maintain a political status quo over time, extending their dominion over a great many aspects of society. In particular, the governments of the states around the Persian Gulf have been strengthened by the massive profits generated by the petroleum industry. “The cohesion and persistence of the regimes could partly be explained in obvious ways. Governments now had means of control and repression at their disposal such as had not been available in the past: intelligence and security services, armies, in some places, mercenaries forces recruited from outside.

If they wished, and if the instruments of repression did not break in their hands, they could crush any movement of revolt, at whatever cost; the only check was imposed by the fact that the instruments were not wholly passive and might turn against the rulers or dissolve, as happened in Iran in the face of the massive rising of the people in 1979-80. They had also a direct control over the whole of society such as no government had had in the past” (Hourani 1994: 448).

3. The shadow side of Pax Americana

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, the United States gradually replaced Britain as the main Western power in the Middle East. Now a superpower, the US extended their influence over the region in an extent manner. Through business transactions, bribes, persuasion, and compulsion, the US safeguarded and promoted their interests, ranging from monopolies in the oil sector to arms sales. As such, American interventions in the region became a constant in the decades to follow. An example of this was the successful coup, orchestrated by the CIA, against the Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, in response to the nationalization of the oil industry in Iran.

Several respected American intellectuals have commented on the gravity of the implications of US political and military interference in the Middle East, such as Gore Vidal, who formulated the following criticism at the beginning of this century: “For fifty years we have supported too many tyrants, overthrown too many democratic governments, wasted too much of our own money in other people’s civil wars to pretend that we’re just helping out all those poor little folks around the world who love freedom and democracy just like we do” (Vidal 2001: 324).

Along the same lines, an important economist recently remarked: “For almost seven decades, the US and its allies have repeatedly intervened (or supported internally-led coups) to oust governments that were not sufficiently under their thumb. The West also armed the entire region through hundreds of billions of dollars in weapons sales. The US established military bases throughout the region and successive failed operations by the CIA have left massive supplies of armaments in the hands of violent foes of the US and Europe” (Sachs, “A new century dawns” 2015).

Since the late 1970s, successive governments of both Republicans and Democrats have intensified diplomatic, military and intelligence activities in order to safeguard US economic and geopolitical interests. Jeffrey Sachs recently commented in his analysis of these operations that “The CIA recruited widely from Muslim populations (including in Europe) to form the Mujahideen, a multinational Sunni fighting force mobilized to oust the Soviet infidel from Afghanistan.” He then pointed out that, using the jihad ideology of expelling infidel intruders from Islamic lands,

“[...] the CIA produced a hardened fighting force of thousands of young men displaced from their homes and stoked for battle. It is this initial fighting force – and the ideology that motivated it – that today still forms the basis of the Sunni jihadist insurgencies, including ISIS. While the jihadists’ original target was the Soviet Union, today the ‘infidel’ includes the US, Europe (notably France and the United Kingdom), and Russia.” (Sachs “Ending Blowback Terrorism” 2015).

These conditions were aggravated by the actions and military interventions of the US and their European allies in the 1990s and early 21st century. The destabilization or deposition of governments and dictators in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and other countries has caused power vacuums and the subsequent disintegration of several centralized states. Not held in check anymore by strong central governments, fundamentalist ideologies that had been dormant for centuries were now able to flourish, conveniently channeling hate and hostility towards a common enemy. Their archaic conceptions notwithstanding, the apparent rise in jihadi terrorism demonstrates that these groups have picked up momentum. Muslim extremists' targets are the commercialization of social relations and human interaction, symbols of capitalism, modern secularism and Western values and lifestyles in general. In the communities where they have a dominant role, whether they be towns under IS control or ethnic enclaves in big European cities, they try to impose, through persuasion or coercion, a social order that reflects their values. Therefore, it can be said that some “clash of civilizations” is exactly what extremist groups are looking for. As indicated before, Muslim extremist groups are not confined to traditionally Islamic countries. They have also been able to flourish in Western European countries with a significant Muslim minority, such as France, Belgium, and Britain. Migrants, refugees, and descendants, are treated as second-class citizens; they are subjected to discrimination and Islamophobia, denied formal education and better job opportunities.

As a marginalized youth, these groups provide a substantial pool of potential for jihadist recruiters to tap into, turning ethnic neighborhoods in cities like Paris, Brussels, and London into incubators for Muslim extremism. The US and their European allies responded to terrorist activities in kind, adopting the principle of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”. Especially during the presidency of George W. Bush, the West resorted to a crusade-like policy based on the projection of military force, US political, moral and economic supremacy, 'just war' and a civilisation offensive. The main result of this aggressive policy was that a large part of the Muslim population turned against the West, which in turn aided the terrorists' cause.

For these reasons, it is incontestable that international politics at the dawn of the 21st century have become impregnated with what is called the 'Islamic question.' It is now clear that this question cannot be resolved by the simple use of coercion and brute force, which creates new challenges for the international community. The inclusion of the most numerous and, up to the present most resistant to modernization, of world religions into the global community will indeed require much more than just the military supremacy of the US (Ricupero, 2009).

4. Political order and the new phase of capitalism

In the 1980s a process of complex and diverse economic transformations was initiated, which heralded the beginning of the post-industrial phase in capitalism, characterized by a restructuring of the production chains, increased importance of the financial sector, the information technology revolution, neoliberalism, globalization, etc. This process was accompanied by the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the gradual opening of the Chinese economy, the push towards neoliberalism by social-democrats in Western Europe and the subsequent weakened position of the trade unions, among other things.

The beginning of the post-modern world order was, according to some, the end of an era initiated in 1917, the year of the October Revolution in Russia. For over 70 years, Western governments and ruling classes had lived with a certain fear of communism and the potential for class revolution associated with it (Hobsbawm, 1991). By others, such as Francis Fukuyama (2006), these transformations were interpreted as a definitive victory for free market capitalism and the univerzalisation of Western civilization and values; an end point in the ideological evolution of humanity or, as he puts it, “the end of history.”

Despite the enthusiastic reception of Fukuyama's prophecy by the media, history reduced it to a mere ideological spasm almost immediately. What happened was that capitalism entered a new phase, just like it had passed through the phases of mercantilism (16th to 18th century), the first (18th and 19th century) and second (1870-1970) industrial revolution; the latter also being referred to as the imperialism or globalization phase.

The transformations in capitalism coincided with the end of the Cold War, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Although these events opened up opportunities for the depolarization of world politics and democratization, what happened was the exact opposite. The US, without the counterbalance of the Soviet Union, confidently took on the role of the world's police officer, attributing themselves the right to intervene in the internal affairs of any country that did not comply with the 'will of the international community', which became at that point almost synonymous with the interests of the US and its allies. In this context, concepts and doctrines like the “axis of evil,” “just war”, “international authority,” “civilization mission,” “permanent exception” and “war without end” played a central role (Ianni, 2004, 271-2). In 1996, the authoritative American scholar Samuel P. Huntington elaborated the “clash of civilizations” theory. According to this view, fundamental conflicts in the new, post-Cold War world order would no longer be of an economic or ideological nature but rooted in cultural differences. In particular, he referred to the potential for antagonism between the Western civilization; liberal, Christian, civilized, rational and developed, and the Muslim world, perceived as uncivilized, barbarian, underdeveloped, authoritarian, narrow-minded and cruel. Uncoincidentally, Huntington's theory was widely diffused and adopted as a guideline by the American diplomacy.

It is interesting though that in this new world order some old doctrines and geopolitical practices have resurfaced, such as the preventive counter-insurgency aimed at debilitating forces that may be in conflict with American interests before they become an actual threat. The saying by the 19th-century German military strategist Karl von Clausewitz that “war is the continuation of politics by other means” was resuscitated and has since become the basis for American sanctions and interventions.

Besides that, the United States and its allies have attempted to monopolize the legitimate use of force anywhere in the world. Thus, based on US military force and imperialist policies, international relations have become “subjected to the doctrine of permanent exceptionalism” (Belluzzo, 2004, 132), according to which the US are a unique phenomenon in human history and superior in both morale and military might to other countries and entities. This concept, however, echoes the ancient proposition that in any conflict or war the winner is always right (Bobbio, 1979).

At the same time, in agreement with the logic of globalization, a strong political-ideological offensive was launched against the welfare state and in favor of deregulation, trade liberalization and other economic policies aligned to big multinational conglomerates based in the US, Europe, China, and Japan. Simultaneously, the freedom of peripheral nation-states to make their economic policies decreased to the extent they were exposed to global financial markets. In this process, some of the key characteristics of the classic nation-state seem to have been modified in ways where national sovereignty is not simply curtailed, but slowly being corroded from the basis (Ianni 1995), something that renders local decision makers “materially limited in their capacity to decide.” (Faria 1999: 23)

It is evident that globalisation has several substantial implications: a) capital now moves at an extraordinary speed and has an elevated reproductional capacity; b) financial markets have globalised and become virtual, with capital flowing across national borders at unprecedented levels; c) the circulation of goods, capital and people across the world has loosened the link between industries and their regions of origin and is flattening out cultural differences and borders, both real and imaginary; d) work, social and production relations, as well as means of communication, have drastically altered; e) the redefinition of nation-states into geopolitical units with internal markets – characterised by a complex network of commercialized social relations with the free circulation of goods and workers, administered as “imagined communities” by a sovereign power (Anderson 1983) – has eroded the authority and jurisdiction of traditional institutions like parliaments, political parties, legal systems, trade unions, the press, churches and civic associations.

“Some of the best known facets of the redefinition of nation-state sovereignty are the weakening of state authority, the distortion of the balance between powers and the loss of autonomy of the bureaucratic apparatus. These developments become apparent in the way the state positions itself in those sectors of society (public or private) most directly affected by the phenomenon of globalization. [...] Another important point in this context are the recurring discussions about the place and reach of representative democracy in a globalized economy. Such discussions focus on the possible substitution of politics and the public domain by market mechanisms; the erosion of certain mechanisms applied to shape collective identities during the modern period; new types of sociability generated by the widespread commercialization of social relations; the crippling diversity of opinions and perceptions regarding the past and future of the nation-state; the decreasing effectivity of parliamentary representation and, at last, the increasingly diffuse and intransparent way in which the legal framework that governs international economics, finance, industry and commerce is formulated” (Faria 1999: 25-28).

It can be argued that globalization is, to a large extent, a process of Americanisation that was initiated as early as the first decades of the 20th century. It involves not only the expansion of American capital and goods but also the dissemination of American culture and values. This process has been channeled through international organizations, such as the World Bank, IMF, OECD, and IDB. In a broader historical context, it can be seen as a result of European colonial expansion since the 16th century and the subsequently forced adoption of bourgeois social relations and capitalist norms in most of the world.

For this reason, it is not entirely implausible that the acts of terrorism committed by jihadists are in fact desperate attempts to resist Westernisation of the Muslim world. Furthermore, the organization and diffusion of jihadism, as well as its methods and attitudes, actually reveal many elements of internationalization in their right. However, the effects of globalization are not restricted to a redistribution of power in nation-states accompanied with an intensification of the movement of capital, goods, and people. The exercise of civil, political, and social rights, for instance, has been profoundly affected by it. These rights were, for the most part, instituted during the heydays of the nation-state and are therefore based on the concepts of nationality and citizenship. This means that states distinguished between nationals from non-nationals and created two categories of non-nationals.

On the one hand, legalized permanent residents, refugees, and their families access the rights defined by the state they are residents and face multiple barriers accessing them. On the other hand, illegal migrants do not access any rights. So while globalization has stimulated the movement across borders of individuals in a variety of ways, economic, cultural, voluntary, forced, licit and illicit, it has not addressed the human rights issue in an adequate manner. Despite the unprecedented global movement of people, capital, and goods, there is as yet no such thing as 'world citizen.'

The civil, political, and social rights issue is an increasingly disrupting factor in international politics and economics since the effects of globalization encompassed a weaker position of workers everywhere and increased discrimination and ethnic-cultural oppression. Therefore, globalization has indirectly incentivized the re-emergence of conservative nationalist ideologies, religious fundamentalism, and other intolerant or anti-humanist movements. In this context, the persistence of Islamic jihad groups and the electoral successes of extreme right-wing political parties in Europe can be seen as different manifestations of the same underlying problem.

Despite the fact that globalization has raised new dilemmas and brought back old problems, it also creates several possibilities for positive change, ranging from depolarization and more interdependence among nation-states to the strengthening of the position of international organizations by increasing their democratic legitimacy and ability to apply international law in the capacity of mediators in conflicts. In this scenario, the UN, whose role has been largely marginalized over the past decades, could become a key player. If nation-states were willing to attribute real power to the UN, this supra-national organization would be in a position to keep other powers, both public and private, in check. This shift would create a framework for a pluralist, multi-polar world order, and a platform for universal values in favor of peace, human rights, democracy, citizenship, public health care, poverty alleviation and environment conservation.

In order to eliminate violence and terrorism by confining the demons of all classes, races, ethnicities, religions and ideologies, it is imperative that the concept of the 'international community' should be renovated. Power needs to be bestowed on supra-national organizations, which should be based on democratic and pluralistic principles in more than just name. Without such structural reforms, it is likely that humanity will continue to have to face, for instance, international terrorism and coordinated violence against people and property.

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