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Political Terminologies and "Terrorism"

Newt Gingrich's 'Terrorism'

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On September 30, within the time frame of a few hours, an accused man reportedly confessed to terrorism charges in Germany, the terrorism threat level was raised in Sweden, and former US Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich lengthily discussed 'suicidal jihadists' in a speech he made in Denver.

Although it was tacitly understood that US president Barack Obama has distanced himself from his predecessor's indefinite war objectives – embodied in the ill-defined 'war on terror' – the chances are the dreadful term 'terrorism' is not going to leave us alone anytime soon.

Regardless of its alleged French roots – dating back to the French revolution of the late 18th century – 'terrorism' is very much a political term and very much a recent one. US officials, especially those vying for political office, are very generous in their use of this word. But others – from the most authoritarian, dictatorial regimes to Scandinavian democracies – have also developed a special affinity to it. Evoking a threat of terrorism is a very clever way to achieve political galvanization, as it creates a sharp and unmistakable delineation between us – the human, civilized and 'democratic' – and the inhuman and barbaric others. When the term 'terrorism' is unleashed, there are no half positions, no middle grounds, no grey areas.

Thus, Gingrich could not have formulated a better entrance to the foreign policy debate than to position himself as America's savior – not only from the terrorists, whoever they are, and wherever they are – but also from America's incompetent leadership since the attacks of September 11, 2001. According to Gingrich, George W. Bush should have replaced all of his government's security apparatus following the dreadful attacks, and Barack Obama should have done the same following the bomb scare over Detroit in late 2009.

The rightwing politician also conveniently linked Iran to terrorism, coined new terminologies, fondly recalled the 'peaceful' defeat of communism, derided everyone who doesn't agree with him, and continued to refuse to disclose whether he is planning to run for office in 2012.

Americans have been long familiar with Gingrich's emblematic rants. But they are also afraid of terrorism. They have been told that terrorism is anything but a political coinage and endeavor; in fact it is ultimately about a bomb and two wires, one green and one red. Every aspiring politician poses as the one who knows exactly which wire to cut. Gingrich moulds the threat in any way he finds politically useful. Then he exaggerates the concocted threat and promises to cut the right wire in order to increase his chances at elections.

All of this is fear-mongering at its best. It's unlikely that Gingrich is actually interested in bringing the terrorist threat to an end. What truly inspires his politicking is the fact that he can sustain his intolerant, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, pro-war and exclusivist American agenda using one simple, yet loaded phrase: 'terrorism'.

The Denver Post reported on Gingrich's speech on October 1:

> "Gingrich…call(ed) Iran 'a regime of suicide bombers' and demand(ed) tough sanctions against China if it won't help contain Tehran…As suicidal jihadists, Gingrich said, Iranian leaders believe their dead martyrs go to heaven and Israelis 'go to hell,' so they win…'It's impossible to deter them. What are you going to threaten?' Gingrich said the need for tougher terrorism measures includes the U.S. border with Mexico. 'Think of all the money and effort spent to screen for terrorists at airports,' Gingrich said, 'on the assumption our opponents can't rent a truck in Mexico.'"

It's incredible how such a demagogue managed to squeeze his entire political program in few words: containing Iran, punishing China, curtailing immigration, isolating Mexico, taking stricter measures at home to combat whatever threat, real or imagined, that pops into his head. All of this is declared under the guise of fighting terrorism.

Since September 11, the anti-terror infrastructure in American has grown beyond belief. The media reports on numerous, unbridled offices, organizations and outlets, manned by thousands of men and women all dedicated to 'fighting terror'. It's a thriving business, and comprises a huge chunk of the country's budget. There are many thousands of counterterrorism experts, analysts and others who claim to be hell-bent on eradicating terrorism, although it is the very existence of terrorism that guarantees their livelihood, bonuses and healthcare coverage. Because of this, the definition of what is terrorist and what is not is also expanding, becoming in the process much murkier and less decipherable. Still, Gingrich would like more to be done. He joked and ranted about the Homeland Security officials and their failure to protect the country from the terrorist menace. Are they now supposed to eagerly await Gingrich's arrival to right this historical wrong?

Not all of Gingrich's Denver audience was amused. Five protesters were hauled outside the Opera house as they yelled: "Newt is the New World Order" and "The war on terror is a lie!" These were the supposed 'wackos'. Some would even go as far as accuse them of being terrorist-sympathizers, another way of enlarging the circle and cracking down anyone who dares question the wisdom of this random and largely politicized approach to countering terrorism.

In *Dying to Win: Why Suicide Terrorists Do It*, an exhaustive study on the issue of suicide terrorism, American author, who also heads the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism (CPOST) at the University of Chicago, Robert A. Pape writes: "The data show that there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world's religions. In fact, the leading instigators of suicide attacks are the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, a Marxist-Leninist group whose members are from Hindu families but who are adamantly opposed to religion."

One of his seemingly novel conclusions was:

"Rather, what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and

strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland."

No, Mr. Gingrich, terrorism is not a term you simply lob at your enemies for cheap political gains. It's a real problem, with real roots and real casualties. And like any problem, it needs to be properly understood, realistically assessed and wisely confronted.

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