

Terrorism and Insurgency: The Semantics of Political Legitimacy

By [Nauman Sadiq](#)

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The definition of the term “terrorism” has been deliberately left undefined by the Western powers to use it as a catch-all pretext to justify their interventionist policy in the energy-rich Islamic countries. Depending on context, “terrorism” can mean two markedly distinct phenomena: religious extremism or militancy.

If terrorism is understood as religious extremism, then that is a cultural mindset and one cannot possibly hope to transform cultures through the means of war and military interventions; if anything, war will further radicalize the society.

However, by terrorism, if the Western powers mean militancy, then tamping down on militancy and violence through the agency of war does make sense because a policy of disarmament and dewatering can be subsequently pursued in the liberated territories.

That being understood that the Western powers aim to eradicate militancy through wars, but then a question arises that why have the Western powers deliberately funded, trained, armed and internationally legitimized armed militants waging proxy wars against the governments of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya and Bashar al-Assad in Syria since 2011 onward?

Notwithstanding, it can be argued that war and militancy are only means to achieve certain ends, and it's the objectives and goals that determine whether such wars are just or unjust. No-one can dispute the assertion that the notions of “just wars” and “good militants” do exist in the vocabulary; empirically speaking, however, after witnessing the instability, violence and utter chaos and anarchy in the war-ravaged countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen, the onus lies on any “liberal interventionist” to prove beyond doubt that the wars and militants that he justifies and upholds are indeed just and good.

In political science, the devil always lies in the definitions of the terms that we employ. For instance: how does one define a terrorist or a militant? In order to understand this, we need to identify the core of a “militant,” that what essential feature distinguishes him from the rest?

A militant is basically an armed and violent individual who carries out subversive activities against the state. That being understood, now we need to examine the concept of “violence.” Is it violence per se that is wrong, or does some kind of justifiable violence exist?

In the contemporary politics, I take the view, on empirical grounds, that all kinds of violence is essentially wrong; because the ends (goals) for which such violence is often employed are seldom right and elusive at best. Although democracy and liberal ideals are cherished goals but such goals can only be accomplished through peaceful means; expecting from armed

and violent militants to bring about democratic reform is incredibly naïve and preposterous.

The Western mainstream media and its neoliberal constituents, however, take a different view. According to them, there are two distinct kinds of violence: justifiable and unjustifiable. When a militant resorts to violence for the secular and nationalist goals, such as “bringing democracy” to Libya and Syria, the misinformed neoliberals enthusiastically exhort such form of violence.

However, if such militants later turn out to be Islamic jihadists, like the Misrata militia and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, or the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front, Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, the credulous neoliberals, who were misguided by the mainstream narrative, promptly make a volte-face and label them as “terrorists.”

More to the point, there is a big difference between an anarchist and a nihilist: an anarchist believes in something and wants to change the status quo in the favor of that belief, while a nihilist believes is nothing and considers life to be meaningless.

Similarly, there is also a not-so-subtle difference between a terrorist and an insurgent: an Islamic insurgent believes in something and wants to enforce that agenda in the insurgency-hit regions, whereas a terrorist is simply a bloodthirsty lunatic who is hell-bent on causing death and destruction. The distinguishing feature between the two is that an insurgent has well defined objectives and territorial ambitions, while a terrorist is basically motivated by the spirit of revenge and the goal of causing widespread fear.

The phenomena of terrorism is that which threatened the Western countries between 2001 to 2005 when some of the most audacious terrorist acts were carried out by al-Qaeda against the Western targets like the 9/11 tragedy, the Madrid bombing in 2004 and the London bombing in 2005; or the terrorist acts committed by the Islamic State in Europe from 2015 to 2017.

However, the phenomena which is currently threatening the Islamic countries is not terrorism, as such, but Islamic insurgencies. Excluding al Qaeda Central which is a known transnational terrorist organization, all the regional militant groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan, al Shabab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria, and even some of the ideological affiliates of al Qaeda and Islamic State, like Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb, the Islamic State affiliates in Afghanistan, Sinai and Libya which have no organizational and operational association with al Qaeda Central or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, respectively, are not terror groups, as such, but Islamic insurgents who are fighting for the goals of liberating their homelands from foreign occupation and interference.

Nevertheless, after invading and occupying Afghanistan and Iraq, and when the American “nation-building” projects failed in those hapless countries, the US policymakers immediately realized that they were facing large-scale and popularly rooted insurgencies against foreign occupation; consequently, the occupying military altered its CT (counter-terrorism) approach in the favor of a COIN (counter-insurgency) strategy.

A COIN strategy is essentially different from a CT approach and it also involves dialogue, negotiations and political settlements, alongside the coercive tactics of law enforcement and military and paramilitary operations on a limited scale.

The root factors that are primarily responsible for spawning militancy and insurgency anywhere in the world are not religion but socio-economics, ethnic differences, marginalization of disenfranchised ethno-linguistic and ethno-religious groups and the ensuing conflicts; socio-cultural backwardness of the affected regions, and the weak central control of the impoverished developing states over their remote rural and tribal areas.

Additionally, if we take a cursory look at some of the worst insurgency-plagued regions in the Middle East, deliberate funding, training and arming of certain militant groups by regional and global powers for their strategic interests has played the key role.

Back in the 1980s, during the Soviet-Afghan war, the Afghan jihadists did not spring up spontaneously out of nowhere; the Western powers, with the help of their regional allies, trained and armed those militants against their archrival, the former Soviet Union. Those very same Afghan “freedom fighters” later mutated into the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Similarly, during the proxy wars in Libya and Syria, the Western powers, with the help of their regional client states, once again trained and armed Islamic jihadists and tribal militiamen against the governments of Colonel Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad. And isn't it ironic that those very same “moderate rebels” later mutated into Ansar al Sharia, al Nusra Front and the Islamic State?

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Nauman Sadiq is an Islamabad-based attorney, columnist and geopolitical analyst focused on the politics of Af-Pak and Middle East regions, neocolonialism and petro-imperialism. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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