
The Global War on Terror and State Terrorism

MICHAEL STOHL

While it is often proclaimed that the events of 9/11 changed "everything," it is important to stress that even more than the carnage and impact of that day, it has been the response of the Bush administration and its impact on multiple audiences around the world which have been more important than the al-Qaeda attacks in shaping the post 9/11 world. As Stohl (2008) argues, despite the etymological roots and historical employment of violence and terrorism by the state against its own citizens scholars who consider themselves experts on "terrorism" rarely consider the violence perpetrated by the state against its own population or those of states beyond its borders. This also results in databases for terrorism research which in addition to their many other problems do not include the state's use of terror and thus operationalize 'out' the study of state terror. In the case of evaluating the Bush administration and terror the primary foci have been upon the numbers and possibilities of attacks by al-Qaeda and other organizations identified as part of the global war on terror and the state of al-Qaeda as an organization and/or network. The focus of scholarly concern on the data of terrorism has been concerned with the quality of the reported state department provided data on insurgent attacks and not with the absence of reported incidents of state terror (see for example Krueger and Laitin 2004).

Much of the Bush administration's response to 9/11 has focused on (a) criticism of the choice to fight a "Global War on Terrorism," (b) the concentration on military power, (c) the choices made in the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan and then (d) linking Saddam Hussein to the war on terrorism and attacking Iraq. Each of these policy critiques arise out of the choice the Bush administration made to pursue a war-fighting rather than criminal justice approach to counterterrorism. The critiques then focus on the logic behind choosing to go to war in Iraq and how the war has been mismanaged and; they often only secondarily confront the inability (or unwillingness) of the Bush administration to differentiate among terrorists and their motivations, geographic foci and targets. For its part, the administration, which came into office believing that rogue states and their sponsorship of terrorism were the key to the terrorism problem (see for example Condoleezza Rice's 2000 Foreign Affairs article laying out the administration's

foreign policy assumptions), continues to justify its decision to attack Iraq as part of the Global War on Terrorism. Thus, their policy choices remain consistent with their pre 9/11 beliefs on confronting terrorism.

The Bush administration's counterterrorism strategy was initiated in October 2001 with the official launching of Operation Enduring Freedom and was followed eighteen months later by the attack on Iraq in what was dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom. As has been noted previously (Stohl and Stohl 2007), the strategic approach for which the administration has opted, i.e. counterterrorism as war, does not recognize the difference between terrorism and other forms of violence in that it does not recognize the core communicative role that the violence of terrorism and counterterrorism plays. There has been much recognition that the choices made by the administration with respect to its willingness to challenge long standing principles of American military and legal policy such as the Geneva conventions and the use of torture, the CIA policy of rendition, as well as the unintended consequences of the scandal at Abu Ghraib have all diminished the standing of the United States in the eyes of much of the world's public. U.S. policy makers seem to have reinvented the logic of the 1950 Hoover Commission to justify policies and tactics that would "normally" be considered outside the bounds of acceptable behavior justifications, which would certainly appeal to Dostoevsky's brooding brothers Smerdyakov and Ivan Karamazov who concluded that "if there is no God, all behavior is permissible."

But what has not been examined closely is the relationship between these choices and the subsequent increase in both human rights violations and state repression in states that the United States has recruited into its War on Terror. Because scholars of terrorism have seen state violence and terrorism as outside the bounds of terrorism studies they do not consider how the choices in the Bush administration's counterterrorism strategy enable, acquiesce to or ignore the violence of the recruited states and this has deleterious effects not only for the populations that are repressed but also the counterterrorism efforts of the United States.

To pursue its strategic choices the United States engaged in coalition building, creating the Global Coalition Against Terrorism (<http://www.state.gov/coalition/12669.htm>) and as a key component of that coalition building, dramatically altered its arms sales and arms sales policies as well as providing significant diplomatic praise to its new partners for their assistance in the global war against terrorism. I will argue that a direct consequence of this strategy has been an increase in state repression and state terror. In addition, the prosecution of the GWOT in this manner has had the clearly unintended consequence of further alienating the very audiences that the US requires to support its goals if

its “war on terrorism” is to have any chance of success in the long term. The material and diplomatic alterations in US policy and the decision calculus of states are the most important nexus to consider in government choices to engage in state terrorism. In the context of state terrorism, it is important to examine the consequences of the United States decision to build this coalition, not only in terms of its impact on confronting al-Qaeda and reducing the threat of terrorism to the United States, but also the impact that such a strategy and its implementation have on the conditions within the states that became members of the coalition.

Duvall and Stohl (1983) and Stohl (1984) explored the considerations that states may make in choosing to employ terror against their own citizens and to assist other states to do so. The underlying argument was that state decision makers pursued what Weiner (1972) refers to as an "Expectancy X Value" theory or expected utility theory of motivation in which "the direction and intensity of behavior is a function of the expectation that certain actions will lead to the goal, and the incentive value of the goal object." The argument assumes that an actor behaves in accordance with a basic calculation which consists of three main elements: (1) the benefits, that the actor would receive from some desired state of affairs; (2) the actor's beliefs about the probability with which the desired state of affairs would be brought about if the actor were to engage in a particular action; and (3) the actor's beliefs about the probable costs, or negative consequences that it would have to bear as a result of its engaging in that action. It assumes therefore that the greater the relative expected utility of terrorist action for an actor as compared to other forms of governance, the greater is the probability that the actor will engage in terrorist action.

When governments consider the costs of engaging in terrorist behaviors, two kinds of costs can be distinguished, response costs and production costs. *Response costs* are those costs which might be imposed by the target group and/or sympathetic or offended bystanders. The bystanders in the foreign-policy realm may include domestic and foreign audiences, while the target in international as in domestic affairs may be wider than the attacking party may have intended. When governments consider various means of governance, they are also attentive to the expected responses of others. What others likely will do in reaction affects the utility of a particular strategy. Most relevant to a consideration of terrorism are what might be called punitive or retributive costs imposed by the target group and/or sympathetic or offended bystanders. Governments are sensitive to the costs imposed by other governments for their behaviors. Foreign government diplomatic condemnations, sanctions, trade embargoes etc. push governments to caution or secrecy in terms of their “unacceptable” behaviors, such as state terrorism, repression and other forms of

human rights violations.

In discussions of insurgent terrorists it is often remarked that these terrorists attempt to make themselves invulnerable. There are at least two means to this end. One is inaccessibility. Retaliators may know in general, or even in particular, who the terrorist is but be unable to locate him. The anonymity of refugee camps or urban areas, and physical mobility provide this inaccessibility for insurgent terrorists. Insurgents seek safe havens amongst supporters or within populations (or states) which are unwilling to confront them and make the calculation to acquiesce to the presence of terrorists within their midst. One of the key elements of any counterterrorism strategy is the struggle to convince populations that the costs of offering safe haven – or simply allowing safe havens – are greater than the cost of assisting governments in eliminating such havens.

In general, we don't think of governments and governmental decision makers as inaccessible in these terms, except to the extent that they completely insulate themselves from popular contacts, and to the degree that they are immune to international pressure. They tend to rely more on the second means of invulnerability, that is, secrecy of action. State terrorism can often be expected to be covert action, because in this way the government effectively reduces its vulnerability to retaliation even below its vulnerability to the (otherwise lesser) response costs expected for other means of governance. This means that, in general, state terrorism will not have "publicity of its cause" as an objective (This does not mean that the government wishes the "terror" to be unknown, but rather that the government does not publicize its role and relies on the communication of the threat through word of mouth and rumors). Also, it means that as public accessibility to governmental officials is greater, and/or as regime vulnerability to international pressure is greater, terrorism is more likely to be secretive or carried out by paramilitaries whose connections to the government are officially denied.

Production costs are the costs of taking the action regardless of the reactions of others. In addition to the economic cost - paying the participants, buying weapons and the like – there is the psychological cost of behaving in a manner which most individuals, under normal conditions, would characterize as unacceptable.

The psychological costs that an actor can expect from perpetrating violence on an incidental, instrumental, victim involves two conjoining factors. The first factor is the extent to which human life is valued (or conversely, the strength of internalized prohibitions against violence in general). The second is the extent to which the victim can be or has been dehumanized in the mind of the violent actor. Where moral/normative prohibitions are weak and especially where vic-

tims can be viewed in other than human terms, the self-imposed costs of terrorist actions are apt to be low and hence the choice of terrorist actions more frequent (Duvall and Stohl, 1983, p. 209).

The extent to which victims and potential victims can be dehumanized is affected by two important variables (for an extended discussion of this point see the seminal piece by Herbert Kelman, 1973). The first is the perceived social distance between the government and the victim population. The second is the extent to which action is routinely and bureaucratically authorized, so that personal responsibility is perceived, by all actors in the decisional chain, to be lower for governments (I) in a conflict situation with those they define as “inferior” and/or (II) with a highly bureaucratized coercive machinery. In the context of the global coalition, the United States identified al-Qaeda as an organization that operated in “more than sixty countries.” Stohl and Stohl (2007) have critiqued the administration’s use of the network designation through which organizational “links” were transformed into organizational control and which obscured the differing organizational goals, recruitment patterns and tactical and operational coordination. States however, were happy to request assistance or to be asked to accept assistance from the United States which would aid them in rooting out al-Qaeda and the designated “al-Qaeda organizational affiliate” from within their states. al-Qaeda (and violent jihadis in general) was characterized as apocalyptic and hateful, devoid of reasonable political aims, interested only in death and destruction and thus incapable of rational thought or political bargaining.

Since, from the administration’s view, these terrorists and their organizations are only interested in death and destruction, the obvious strategic conclusion is that they must be eliminated because they cannot be neutralized or moderated. Thus, in Kelman’s terms, the identification of the political opponents, minority groups and other terrorists as al-Qaeda served the function of increasing the perceived social distance between the government and the victim population for the government itself but even more importantly perhaps for the external “publics” in this case, the United States government and population (and others in the West) and thus provided for a reduction in response costs as well. Thus, all things being equal, a reduction in either or both production and response costs should increase the expected utility of the choice of state repression and/or terrorism by states.

We would therefore expect that increasing U.S. assistance to states in the Global Coalition against terrorism which have identified themselves as having terrorism problems linked to al-Qaeda should show declining human rights situations and increases in state repression and terror. Further, the communica-

tion of U.S. approval for the actions of such states should serve to reduce support for the United States within those countries, as populations there (and elsewhere) recognize the role that U.S. support for these repressive states plays in their ability to engage in repression and state terror. Thus, beyond those states that have received material support, states whose repressive policies have been given support are noticed and are likely to bring negative responses to the United States over time and thus reduce the ability of the United States to mobilize these populations against the terrorists the U.S. seeks to confront.

These important consequences of counterterrorism policy thus far have received much less consideration than warranted by their implications and we should briefly consider why. First, many scholars continue to have difficulty with the concept of state terrorism – except as it is applied to illegitimate rulers or non-democratic regimes. Violence by legitimate states tends to be considered well within the legitimate practices of the state and hence not terrorist in nature. Sproat noted in 1991 “As Crelinstein phrased it, ‘the legitimacy and power of the state tend to cloak any overt forms of (its) violence in different guises, such as arrest instead of abduction . . . imprisonment instead of hostage taking, execution instead of murder,’ and internationally coercive diplomacy instead of blackmail.”

In addition, the discussions that have taken place about violations of the Geneva conventions and the use of torture with respect to the Bush administration in general focus on either the ticking bomb question or the issue of violations of law and the expectations of the behavior of democratic states rather than on the repressive states who join the coalition. The behavior of other national states who are “helping” the U.S. in the global war against terrorism and domestic conditions within those states has not been a traditional concern of “realist” scholars or political commentators who have no expectations that these states “should” behave better. Further, both international relations scholars and scholars of terrorism and counterterrorism have been far more concerned with hard rather than soft power (Nye 2008) and do not think in terms of multiple global audiences in the contemporary global communication and media environment. Thus, they do not normally consider the role of public diplomacy in counterterrorism. It is time to recognize that not only is the whole world watching, it is watching the whole world.

Michael Stohl is Professor of Communication at the University of California Santa Barbara.

REFERENCES:

Crelinstein, R.D. "Power and Meaning: Terrorism As a Struggle Over Access to the Communication Structure" in *Contemporary Research On Terrorism*. eds. P. Wilkinson and A. M. Stewart (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), p. 440.

Duvall, R. D. and Stohl, M. 1983. "Governance by Terror," chapter six in Stohl, M. (ed.) *The Politics of Terrorism*. Second edition, Marcel Dekker, 1983: pp. 179-219. Third Edition, Revised and Expanded, 1988: pp. 231-271.

Kelman, H. 1973. "Violence Without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers." *Journal of Social Issues*. 29(4), pp. 26-61.

Nye, J. 2008 "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2008; 616; 95-109.

Krueger, A. and Laitin, D. 2004 "Misunderestimating Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 83, 5,8-13.

Sproat, P. 1991. "Can the State be Terrorist?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 14, 1:19-29.

Stohl, C. and Stohl, M. 2007, "Networks of Terror: Theoretical Assumptions and Pragmatic Consequences" *Communication Theory* 47,2:93-124.

Stohl, M. 1984. "National Interests and State Terrorism" *Political Science*, 36, 2:37-52.

Stohl, M. 2008. "Old myths, new fantasies and the enduring realities of terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1:1, 5 – 16

Weiner, Bernard. 1972. *Theories of Motivation*. Chicago: Markham.