

State vs Non-state Armed Groups – A Political Economy of Violence

Dr. Francis Jegede

College of Law Humanities & Social Sciences
University of Derby
Kedleston Road, Derby DE22 1GB, United Kingdom.
f.j.jegede@derby.ac.uk

Mr. Kevin Bampton

College of Law Humanities & Social Sciences
University of Derby
Kedleston Road, Derby DE22 1GB, United Kingdom.
K.Bampton@derby.ac.uk

Prof. Malcolm Todd

College of Law Humanities & Social Sciences
University of Derby
Kedleston Road, Derby DE22 1GB, United Kingdom.
M.Todd@derby.ac.uk

Abstract—The early 21st century has witnessed the rise in violent extremism with groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Middle East, the Boko Haram in West Africa, and Al Shabaab in East Africa. The activities of these and other non-state armed groups have created a general state of panic and fear that is spreading beyond their areas of operation to other parts of the political world. Rather than diminishing the influence of these groups, the states' counter extremism strategies seem to be further fuelling the extremism and creating new waves of violence that threatens global security and undermines the very essence of our collective wellbeing. This paper examines the socio-economic and political environment in which these armed groups have thrived and poses the question as to whether the failure of politics and development are to blame for the rise of extremism. The paper proposes a new approach to combating extremism that involves re-connecting people with politics and development. The basic contention of this paper is that there has been a failure of the state to satisfy the wellbeing of its citizens. The paper provides an explanation of, but by no means a justification of, the use of violent extremism in the early 21st century.

Keywords: *violence, extremism, failing states, non-state groups/actors, late capitalism, statelessness.*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges facing the world's nations and society at large in the early 21st century is the rise of violent extremism amongst non-state actors and groups, whose activities are genially believed to pose serious security risks to current world economic and political order. Spanning across Africa, the Middle East and other parts of the world, the activities of non-state armed groups such as Al Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, and other splinter organisations, commonly referred to as terrorists¹ groups, are causing a great deal of concern amongst national security chiefs, political leaders, government officials, foreign policy analysts, and people across all faiths, creed and religious persuasion.

In the last 14 years in particular, the global trends in terrorist activities², have reached an alarming rate, with over five-fold increase in the number of people killed. The number of deaths from terrorist activities rose from 11,133 in 2012 to

¹ Terrorism is a highly contested issue with over 100 definitions of what constitutes a terrorist act. Different countries have different views of a terrorist. (See E. S. Smith, *International Security: Politics, Policy, Prospects* Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 152-158).

² According to the British view, terrorist activities involve the use or threat of action intended to (a) influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and (b) advance a political religious and ideological cause. (Smith 2010, pp. 152.

17,958 in 2013, representing an increase of about 61% [3].

Globally, terrorism-related deaths rose from 3,361 in 2000 to 17,958 in 2013.

While terrorism is a global phenomenon, five countries, all located in the developing world, suffer a disproportionately high incidence of terrorism. These are Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria [3]. Together, these five countries account for 82% of the total deaths from terrorist activities. In comparison, only 5% of all terrorist related deaths were recorded in the OECD countries³ over the last 14 years.

Although there are over 55 countries affected by terrorism in the last 14 years, Table 1 shows fifteen most affected nations in terms of number of lives lost, injuries sustained, property damaged based on their Global Terrorism Index (GTI)⁴.

In both developed and developing world, the threat of terrorist activities has become the major national security concern. This concern is heightened by the recent rise in ultra-violent groups such as ISIL and their territorial ambition to take control of the Middle Eastern countries of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Southern Turkey. Together with ISIL, Boko Haram, the Taliban and Al Qaeda constitute the four most feared terrorist organisations⁵, claiming 66% of deaths from terrorist attacks [3].

The growing concern about the activities of these organisations has led to a hard line response by Western governments, led by the United States, resulting in the use of military force to confront these terrorist armed groups. While a great deal of literature exists on the nature, motives and the spread of terrorist activities, there is very little discussion on the global economic and political contexts in which these groups operate. This paper seeks to provide an explanation of, but by no means a justification of, the use of violent extremism in the early 21st century and pose the question of whether the current counter-terrorism strategy is effective.

Table: Selected socio-economic indicators of countries most affected by terrorist activities as measured by Global Terrorism Index

Source: Human Development Report, 2013

Country	Global Terrorism Index ^a (2014)	Human Development Index ^b (2013)	Population (millions) (2013)	Mean Years of schooling (years) ^c (2012)	Life expectancy at birth (years) ^d (2013)	Literacy rates (adult aged 15 and above) (2012)	Literacy rates (youth aged 15-24) (2012)
Iraq	10.00	0.642	33.8	5.6	69.4	78.5	93.1
Afghanistan	9.39	0.468	30.6	3.2	60.9	-	-
Pakistan	9.37	0.537	182.1	4.7	66.6	54.9	70.7
Nigeria	8.58	0.504	173.6	5.2	52.5	51.1	66.4
Syria	8.12	0.658	21.9	6.6	74.6	84.1	95.3
India	7.86	0.586	1252.1	4.4	66.4	62.8	81.1
Somalia	7.41	-	10.5	-	55.1	-	-
Yemen	7.31	0.500	24.4	2.5	63.1	65.3	86.4
Philippines	7.29	0.660	98.4	8.9	68.7	95.4	97.8
Thailand	7.19	0.722	67.0	7.3	74.4	93.5	98.1
Russia	6.67	0.778	142.8	11.7	68.0	99.7	99.7
Kenya	6.58	0.535	44.4	6.3	61.7	72.2	82.4
Egypt	6.50	0.682	82.1	6.4	71.2	73.9	89.3
Lebanon	6.40	0.765	4.8	7.9	80.0	89.6	98.7
Libya	6.25	0.784	6.2	7.5	75.3	89.5	99.9

^a Global Terrorism Index (GTI) based on the number of lives lost, injuries sustained, property damaged and the psychological after-effects of terrorist activities in a country.
^b Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite measure of average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development—a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living.
^c The average number of years of schooling that a child of school entrance age can expect to receive if current patterns of age-specific enrolment rates continue throughout the child's life.
^d The number of years a newborn infant is expected to live if current patterns of age-specific mortality rates at the time of birth stay the same throughout the child's life.

II. EXPLAINING THE RISE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

A. Historical, economic, social and cultural factors

The recent rise in terrorist activities and violent extremism can best be understood in the context of global capitalism in its late stage. More than at any time in human history, the start of the 21st Century is marked by unprecedented increase in human population, extreme inequalities, and growing pressure over economic resources [6].

This has resulted in the creation of a two-tier society in which, on the one hand, we have prosperous areas/regions of the world with stable governments and functioning institutions, and on the other hand, an economically fragile areas and politically unstable states with failing institutions. Feeding on the weakness or the failure of the state to satisfy the wellbeing of its citizens, especially in the economically and politically marginalized areas of the world, is the growth of new non-governmental actors. The majority of these non-state actors, variously referred to as Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs), Faith Based Organisations (FBOs), Community

³ Excluding the September 11 attack on the United States, Turkey and Israel recorded the highest number of deaths amongst the OECD countries.

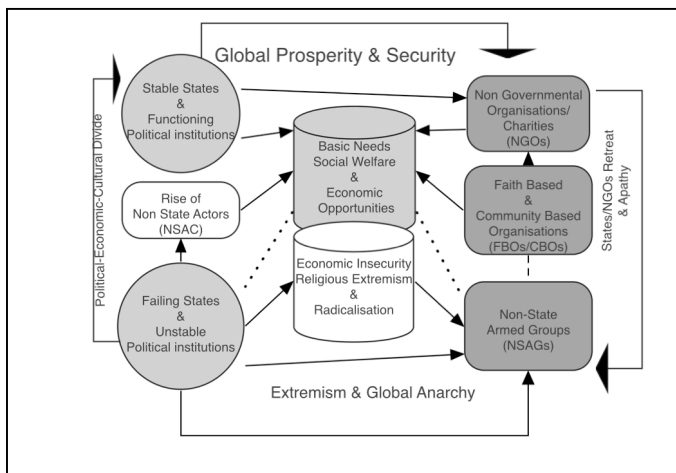
⁴ Global Terrorism Index (GTI) is a quantitative measure of the impact of terrorism based on the number of lives lost, injuries sustained, property damaged and the psychological after-effects of terrorist activities in a country, designed by the Institute for Economics & Peace. The composite score ranging from 0 to 10 provides an ordinal ranking of countries based on negative impact of terrorism. With 10 being the most severe impact.

⁵ Underlying the activities of these four main terrorist groups is the religious ideologies based on extreme interpretations of Wahhabi Islam.

Based Organisations (CBOs), etc., are involved in good work within their communities - filling the gaps created as a result of states' retreat or inability to fulfill or perform their essential social functions to their citizens.

As Figure 1 shows, at the very centre of any state-citizens relationship are the essential social values that states and its institutions are expected to provide for their peoples. These values include; amongst others, security, freedom, order, justice and welfare. The rise of NGOs in the developing world, especially since the 1980s, means non-state actors are taking increasingly prominent role in what used to be a state run affair and responsibility in security and welfare provision.

Figure 1. States, non-states actors and the political economy of violence.



Source: Authors, 2015

With many states in the developing world in retreat and unable to meet their social obligations, non-state actors including faith based organisations are running welfare schemes and providing security for the people. Paradoxically, within the same structure of strengthening the civil society, some sinister organisations have emerged capitalizing on any ethnic, religious or tribal conflict to fuel group grievances.

The lack of inter-group cohesion is exacerbated by general lack of governance as manifested in the corruption of state officials, and other factors such as state sponsored violence, extra judicial killings, lack of access to justice, gross violation of peoples rights. All these factors create a conducive environment for non-state armed groups to operate and launch attacks on local, national and international targets. These non-state armed groups often gain support to their cause by preying on the economic vulnerability of the people in their area of operation. They often use extreme religious ideologies, separatist or nationalistic sentiments to coerce people to support their actions. Violence, intimidation, racketeering are some of the essential tools terrorist organisations use to consolidate their hold on society.

The cumulative effect of terrorist activities is to create fear amongst the people, destabilise the state and create further conditions for them to carry out their activities. The stronger the feeling of group grievances towards the state and its institutions and the more disconnected or disengaged people are from liberal politics, the greater the danger of festering extremism.

The feeling of injustice and sense of economic hopelessness, for example, led to the self-immolation on 17th December 2010 of a young Tunisian fruit vendor which sparked what is now generally known as the Arab Spring. This single act of social and economic alienation and its attendant feeling of frustration led to popular uprisings that spread throughout much of the Arab world. Apart from Tunisia, other countries such as Egypt Yemen and Libya have witnessed uprising and regime change.

The essential lesson to be learned from this is the ability of the people to vent their anger and frustrations through organized protests or mass manifestation of grievance against state system and institutions they considered unjust, undemocratic and incapable of meeting their needs and aspirations .

B. Mass Media and Extremism: Reporting Fear! A Deviance Amplification Spiral

An important aspect of the issue relating to the rise of extremism in the 21st Century is the role of the mass media as an important institution of mass communication and public education. As generally known within the media circus, 'facts tell, but stories sell'. It would appear that most of the media coverage of extremism and terrorist activities in the last decade tends to sensationalise the issue rather than provide media audience with critical analysis of the deep rooted social, economic and political contexts in which these armed groups have grown and flourished. The unintended consequence of this is to create panic within the general populace that fits nicely into the terrorists' agenda and intension.

The political systems, especially in the West, feeds on peoples' fears of terrorist activities, as mediated in the mass media, to create policies that further strengthen the cause of these armed groups. There is no better way to understand the politics of fear than the stories or narratives that the mass media constantly feed their audiences about terrorism.

Overzealous reporting of terrorists' activities in the media is causing what one may consider an exaggerated and sometimes distorted view of society's sense or feeling of insecurity. In what seems to be a counter reaction to the largely pro-state, elitist and un-democratic main stream mass media, terrorist groups have chosen the alternative social media such as Twitter, Facebook to launch their campaigns of terror. The war on terror is now so heavily mediated that there seems to be a competition between the terrorist groups and the mainstream media as to who is more able to shock, unnerve, or alarm the public. Understandably, the media has a sense of duty and responsibility to inform and educate the public, as to the dangers posed by those who are bent on committing terrorist activities. However, this responsibility needs to be balanced with the need to maintain the unity, inclusiveness and

togetherness of all peoples, religions, cultures, etc. in the fight against extremism and terrorism.

It would seem reasonable to suggest that a global approach involving national governments, states, faith and community-based organisations and other local, regional and international organisations could come together to design an integrated approach to deal with the threat of extremism. Terrorists or extremists are our best allies in fighting terrorism. To fight extremism, we need to understand what drive people into extremism in the first place and how best to make it less desirable or viable for young people to get into a situation where they become radicalised. The use of military force won't work, neither will blame game or castigation of one religion or a section of society produce the desired result.

III. ARMING THE STATES: COUNTER-TERRORISM AND USE OF FORCE

A common thread in all the strategies adopted mostly, but not exclusively, by Western governments in the fight against extremism and violence is the use of military force to crack down on these violent groups.

A. Counter terrorism Strategies – Past and Present: Issues & Debate

In the last decades, Western governments led by the United States of America and its allies have favoured the use of intelligence gathering and military action to combat extremism and non-state armed groups especially in the Middle East and North Africa.

The question begging for answer is how effective has the states' counter terrorism strategies in reducing violence and combating extremism? Anecdotal evidence suggests that rather than subduing terrorism and extremism, states counter-terrorism strategies at their best seem to have no real positive effects on extremism.

Evidence from the 1960s suggests that the two most successful strategies for ending terrorist activities are policing and the use of political process. Over 80% of active terrorist organisations and groups were stopped through this approach [3]. While 1% of terrorist groups eventually achieve their goals, only 7% of these groups are stopped purely by the use of military force. Giving this statistics, it means that the current use of force in fighting violent extremism only has 7% chance of success rate.

Some have even argued that on the contrary, the hard line military approach to fighting terrorism and extremism is partly responsible for the rise in the phenomenon. It is a truism that violence begets violence. The great military theorist, General Sun Tzu, once remarked⁶, 'to subdue the enemy without a fight is the supreme excellence'.

It would appear that Western governments counter-terrorism strategies in the last decade are far from being 'excellent' nor effective. The unintended consequence of this strategy has been a progressive isolation of sections of society that see any Western military involvement in any Islamic

country as an attack on their faith. Western media characterisation and description of extremism as an Islamic issue has not helped in galvanizing support from the very community that is most likely to be part of the solution to the problem. Rather, it has increased or accentuated the sense of division in society along religious, ethnic and ideological lines that make a global action at combating extremism more difficult.

Rather than having a united front to tackle a common challenge, the global fight against extremism and its attendant violence has resulted in what some describe as a 'clash of civilisation'. The rise of extremism, in spite of states counter-terrorism strategies seems to suggest a failure of Western governments' strategies. The failure of military power to stop non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria where 200 school children were seized and vanished without trace and still missing makes a classic case for a government that is militarily and politically inept and incapable of providing the basic value of security for its own people. Since the disappearance of the 200 Nigerian School children, Boko Haram has conducted a series of other more daring attacks on villages in Northern Nigeria that have left several hundreds of people dead. The Nigerian military actions has not worked, and Boko Haram is growing stronger and expanding their control and influence over a sizable geographical area of northern Nigeria.

Given the low success rate of combating terrorism and extremism through the use of military force, perhaps a critical re-evaluation and re-thinking of current approach at dealing with ISIL, Boko Haram and other armed groups is essential if the war on terror or extremism is to be won. Towards this end, political leaders and national security agents need a new way of engaging all sections of society in their effort to defeat violence extremism.

Essential to this new approach is the need for a different politics, i.e., politics by other means and a concomitant change in the Western media narratives and discourse on the causes of global terrorism and violent extremism. Power politics involving the use of force in dealing with extremism represents a failure of strategies as this leads to more violence.

The uncomfortable truth and irony in the global fight against violent extremism is that terrorists, their sponsors and sympathisers together with ex-terrorists are our best allies in fighting extremism if we were to avert what Frank (1944) once described as '... an urge and rage in people to destroy, to kill, to murder and until all mankind, without exception, undergoes a great change, wars will be waged, everything that has been built up, cultivated and grown, will be destroyed and disfigured, after which all mankind will have to begin all over again'⁷.

A critical analysis of the terrorists' 'rage' and their 'urge' to kill and maim innocent people together with their *modus operandi* is crucial in any effective counter-terrorism strategy. Much more importantly, however, is the need to know and acknowledge the wider social, economic and political factors that trigger global terrorism and rise of violent extremism. The

⁶ As quoted by Ben Dupré (2010) in '50 political Ideas you really need to know', pp. 183.

⁷ As quoted by Ben Dupré (2010) in '50 political Ideas you really need to know', pp. 182.

strategy of using conventional military hard wares to fight a group of ideologically driven and fanatical individuals who have little or no respect for human life nor the UN conventions on warfare, means that the Western military strategies often fail to deliver any appreciable results. Rather than reducing incidence of terrorism, the hard line hawkish approach is more likely to generate more hatred towards the West and creates even more hard-core terrorists.

IV. TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH TO COUNTER TERRORISM

Given the rise in the global terrorism in spite of the massive increase in military spending and security budgets around the world, it seems plausible to suggest that perhaps it's high time we changed our approach to dealing with terrorism. More than at any other time in human history, we need to acknowledge the failings of global capitalism in meeting the needs of the majority of world's citizens.

At its late stage, global capitalism is dividing the world into what others have referred to as a 20:80 society [16]. A society in which 20% of the world's people enjoy the prosperity and security of global capitalism and remain on top of the socio-economic ladder. This privileged few consume 80% of the world's resources while the other 80% at the bottom of the have to make do with 20% of the world's resources. The number of people living in extreme poverty is growing. The share sense of hopelessness and desperation amongst the growing number of the economically disadvantaged often lead to political disenfranchisement.

As the world's wealth grows, and inequalities increase, so seems to be the general sense of discontent amongst those at the lower levels of society. The feeling of social and economic injustice, at local, regional and global levels can create conditions for mistrust and disconnection from mainstream liberal political and economic systems. This can, in turn, create a conducive environment for radicalization and extremism.

So, rather than using military force to fight terrorism, perhaps we need to understand the social, economic conditions in which these organized violent groups emanated from and address the psychological, social, political and international factors that may directly or indirectly influence violence extremism. Towards this end, Western industrialised nations need to recast their security concerns to include the social and economic in-security of the growing number of marginalised, the disadvantaged people and re-engage those who think, rightly or wrongly, that they have no stake in liberal political and economic systems.

The new strategy should as a matter of necessity *de-religionise*⁸ terrorism and extremism and consider Islam phobia as unhelpful to the global fight against terrorism. Instead, moderate voices within Islam should be heard. Extremist groups within Islam need to be counteracted with moderate

⁸ *Terrorist activities based purely on religious ideologies is just one aspect of global terrorism, other issues or motivation for extremism such as economic/political disenfranchisement, nationalism and separatism, criminality, political terror, gross physical/human rights abuse, etc., are equally important factors in any analysis of the phenomenon.*

views being giving them more prominent media coverage in their advocacy and promotion of non-violent methods of dealing with grievances emanating from that section of the world community.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, six key questions that need to be addressed in relation to recent rise in violent extremism involving non-state armed groups are:

- (a.) Can the current counter-terrorism approach be said to be effective giving the rise in the number of and increased activities of non-state armed groups?
- (b.) If not, what sorts of national security strategies should be adopted in dealing with the violent extremist groups?
- (c.) From whom or from what do we want to be secured – the terrorist or the media?
- (d.) Is merely disrupting terrorist activities or killing members/leaders of violent armed groups giving us a false sense of victory, or is it fuelling the violence and increasing the brutality of these armed groups?
- (e.) Can military violence end the violence of extremism? Or is it a case of violence begetting violence?
- (f.) What do we know of the effectiveness of Western governments' military strategies directed at Al-Qaeda, ISIL, El Shebab, etc., in the last 10 years?

These are some of the burning questions Securities Studies analysts, Western governments' policy makers may seek to find answers, as we enter what seems a rather brutal phase of violent extremism. Meanwhile, we posit that the real success in the fight against violent extremism will, as a matter of necessity, involve winning over the minds of the people involved in violent extremism. This cannot be done through the barrel of guns and mortars. The new warfare is essentially ideological and it is also pitched along social, economic and religious fault lines created by current global capitalist and political system.

The brutality of these non-state armed groups demand an urgent action to fashion a 'new weapon' to fight a war that in all intents and purpose is far from conventional. We believe that the current rise in extremism and use of extreme violence by non-state armed groups and the concomitant counter-reaction of the states to what they perceived as a 'new threat' to national security is a function of the 21st century political, social and economic systems that alienate and divide society and peoples. The fight against extremism can best be won by addressing factors that undermine the sense of belongings, and create a feeling of alienation from society that encourages extremism.

It is high time that political, religious and civil society leaders understood that fighting violence with violence only creates a vicious cycle of violence that makes us all less safe. A war on terror that considers 'us' against 'them' cannot be won, not least by military means. Violence and extremism affect us all. They undermine our sheared values and demean our sense

of humanity. Together, we need to confront and challenge the root cause of extremism and help build a peaceful society where we all have a sense of belonging. It is then, and only then shall we, together, win the war on terror and enjoy the true security that we crave for.

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