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TERRORISM IN WEST AFRICA: PREREQUISITES, ACTORS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Abstract:

Countries in West Africa region are colligated not merely in compliance with the geographical logic in the strictest sense of the word. Their ancient heritage and unique national and cultural shapes of nowadays extend the classic understanding of this part of the Sahel region as a concentrated geographical aggregation. Local prerequisites for sustaining safe and predictable community environment unite whilst abstract Sahel state members as a subject and object to international relations. The purpose of the article is to investigate the local development and manifestation of standard social markers and processes (such as the political system, cultural and religious specifics, economy – including employment rate, national and ethnic neighbourhoods and connections). The author should be able to study and explore the non-static nature of terrorism as a local concept including a) the impacts it accepts and extends; b) the typical regularity in the life cycle of this antisocial phenomenon. Actors and understandings (both local and international) about the rationale, motives and objectives of terrorism in the West Africa region would be analyzed for the purposes of a paper which aims to identify whether viable individual and social opportunities exist as an alternative course and how they should be sourced and handled.

Keywords:

terrorism, culture, religion, motivation, economy

Defining terrorism

This paper aims at analyzing terror as a phenomenon of actual social dimension by endeavouring to identify its contours and these of its

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consequences beyond the abstract understanding we may usually have about this anti-social occurrence.

Subject and object to the analysis are selected among societies inhabiting Africa's territory to the West and South of the conditional border historically set by Sahara desert. Concept of terrorism as a regional phenomenon sets the need for a scientifically grounded look on particular specifics valid for West Africa communities. The adequate assessment of the common socio-economic, cultural and historical scenarios would accomplish the hypothesis of local prerequisites, heroes and alternatives that would, on their part, materialize terrorism beyond the schematicity of a doctrine and would practically make it assessable as per classic civilizational criterion.

Functionality of terrorism organically depends on the type of social and political texture of society's own functioning. Spectre of social tolerance towards individual, cultural, national, religious and ethnical variety is linked to both individual and common maturity (as well as to the level of comfort between them). The local development and manifestation of standard social markers and processes (political system, cultural and religious specifics, economy (including employment rate), national and ethnic neighbourhoods and connections) compound the list of significant symptoms and factors indicating society's health.

Understanding terrorism as a concept should start with taking notice of the historic and emotional connotation set by the very etymology. "Terrorism" origins directly from the Latin word of *terrere* which laconically, yet unambiguously, means "to fear". Fear of the abstract figure of the foreigner, who invades to depolarize pillars of familiar mainstay, is atavistic. Potential encroachment, which is planned and communicated so as to destabilize this mainstay, could be powerful mobilizer of feelings such as panic, disorientation and horror. Man is psychologically motivated to categorize unexplored people, circumstances and situations by trying to work them in their own individual cognitive experience's matrix when tending to solidify their own navigability. Categorization ("terrorism"/"terrorist" in the particular paper) requires a thorough analysis of an individual behavioural reaction. "The basic cognitive process in stereotyping is categorization, the structuring of sense data through grouping persons, objects and events (or their selected attributes), as being similar or equivalent to one another in their relevance to an individual's actions, intentions or attitudes", state Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams². They further insist: "They help us to predict when and how various aspects of these categorizations fit or do not fit requirements posed by the need to systematize the information which individuals receive or select from their environment".

When being analyzed through the multiple leveled specter of a social phenomenon, terrorism requires scientific formulation of essence and aspects impacted by it so as to enable a precise scientific prognosis in regards to its

² M. A. Hogg, D. Abrams, *Intergroup Relations*, Ann Arbor 2011, p. 134.

sustainability. The following description was offered by the United Nations General Assembly in 1994: “Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them”³.

Boaz Ganor, director of International Institute for Counter-Terrorism assumes that “terrorism is a modus operandi in which deliberate violence against civilians is used for the purpose of achieving political goals”⁴.

Key words requiring special deliberation in this statement is the generalized image of “civilians” on their stated capacity of an object to (and apparently a tool for) political ambitions. Apparently there should be clear difference made between “the man” and “the men” as objects. With preserving the spotlight on the characteristics (“civilian” people), we would refer to the explanation about “the crowd”, as offered by Gustave Le Bon in his book “Crowd Psychology”⁵. He states that crowds’ choices are exclusively motivated by unconscious, being deprived from the advantages of keeping its reflexes under control. Le Bon assumes that crowd is, in contrast to individual, not provided with preliminary manifested rationality. Reactions towards external excitors of particular emotions (such as fear) may, therefore, dramatically differ from those of the individual whose emotions would preliminary be “framed” on base of their own cognitive experience.

However, in cases when the audience is subject of or object to arrangements on behalf of a collectively psychological integrity, motives in favour of one or the other behavioural choice apparently require different perusal. Subsequently terrorist organizations, the objects of their collectivity and the subjects to their activities need to be analyzed in the very context of the emotional reasons behind this integrity.

Types of terrorism

Minding the non-static understanding about terrorism, we would note that any precise dissection by specific indicators appears to be time consuming process. However, it generates potentially important knowledge about the very phenomenon hence working counter reactions to be systematized so as to guarantee measurable and effective safety.

The Task Force on Disorders and Terrorism, USA, is seen to be describing terrorism as ”a tactic or technique by means of which a violent act or the threat

³ U. N. General Assembly 84th plenary meeting on 9th December 1994, <<https://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/49/a49r060.htm>> (31.01.2018).

⁴ B. Ganor, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, “Essentials of Terror Medicine”, January 2009, pp. 13-26.

⁵ G. Le Bon, *Psikhologiya na tulpite*, Moscow 2004, p. 25.

thereof is used for the prime purpose of creating overwhelming fear for coercive purposes⁶. The Task Force put disorders and terrorism in six categories. Philip Purpura refers to a definition that describes terrorism as domestic and international⁷.

Membership: Why?

What encourages or urges members to join or to sympathize to terrorism? In-depth rooting the profile of a potential terrorist as a collective image or a unit (yet noting the conditionality of such a generalization) is essential to understanding the realistic motives which may predetermine and stimulate the social phenomenon.

Host community's reactivity

Should we revert to the etymological root of “terrorism”, we would colligate it to the observation that turning an individual or a group of individuals in horror and panic state requires appropriate context to create appropriate prerequisites. The phenomenon could logically be discoverable in environment pending solid political structure which could be eligible to prevent and to neutralize prerequisites to the emergence of fear and lack of confidence. For mono-product economies where full range of natural resources are yet to be fully exploited, vulnerability emerges with the possible over exploitation of one source of wealth to the account of others. Former periphery areas to earlier European metropolises’ industrial expansion – or states to the South of Sahara today – have democratic traditions to deal with which are not genuinely a result to their own experience. Youth unemployment rate, challenged access to qualitative education and healthcare, dynamics in the political conjuncture, the typical cultural, ethnical and national heterogeneity could be seen as productive environment for radical movements to flourish. The relative remoteness of some Sahel countries to geographic alternatives (such as mass refugee flows) may keep the unresolved internal conflicts hermetic by isolating yet eventually intensifying their energy. What is common between the three organizations subject to this paper is the outgoing effect they pursue and radicalism in the set of tools they seem prepared to apply. Another unifying thesis is the rejection of the Western civilizational model. They imply a contrasting set of symbols, messages and suggestions eventually capable to materialize the effect of this rejection. Nigerian group of “Boko Haram” (the name is compound from Hausa and Arabic), which is majorly active in Northern part of the country, aims at

⁶ M. L. Madigan, *Handbook of Emergency Management Concepts: A Step-by-Step Approach*, Boca Raton 2017, Chapter 10.

⁷ P. Purpura, *Terrorism and Homeland Security: An Introduction with Applications*, Burlington 2007, p. 17.

affirming Sharia as a generally valid religious and political order on local ground – on account of the pro-West type of social structure. It is stated that late leader of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf “benefitted immensely from the timing of this message, that coincided with the public resentment precipitated by the social uncertainty arising from excruciating poverty, and so was able to lure many vulnerable, religiously-inclined youths to embrace his new, emerging ‘utopia’, that promised better alternatives to their misery”⁸.

Dr. Benjamin Nickles reportedly concluded that terrorist groups in Africa are sharing three common features in illustration to their essence: marginalization, access to crucial regional links and political vulnerability⁹. He uses the so called “push and pull factors” when analyzing motives of the potential terrorist.

How would all these factors manifest in the cases of the three Sahel active terrorist groups?

Boko Haram in Nigeria apparently has on spotlight (and as a major driving environment) territories widely affected by youth unemployment with every social complications. Noting the stated unemployment and “galloping poverty”¹⁰ we could assume that the attractive (or so called, “push”) power of Boko Haram within environment of limited social alternatives is not only subject to religious fundament but also through opportunities for social integration it seemingly bestows. A similar impression is shared by Mohamed Yahya, Regional Programme Coordinator, UNDP Africa who highlights that the shared sense of deprivation is connecting youths who opt for joining Al-Shabaab in Somalia; as well as shared lack of confidence with the constructive role of the state¹¹. Newsweek cites U.N. envoy to the Sahel, Hiroute Guebre Sellassie, who had (back in 2015) reportedly claimed that as many as 41 million young people “face hopelessness”¹². Analysts are quoted by “USA Today” that al-Quaeda is interested in expanding its positions in Sahel¹³.

⁸ A. O. Salaam, *The Psychological Make-up of Mohammed Yusuf*, E-ir.info, 4.11.2013, <<http://www.e-ir.info/2013/11/04/the-psychological-make-up-of-mohammed-yusuf/>> (31.01.2018).

⁹ The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Understanding Terrorist Treats in Africa*, Africacenter.org, 26.09.2014, <<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-terrorist-threats-in-africa/>> (31.01.2018).

¹⁰ O. J. David, L. E. Asuelime, H. Onapajo, *Boko Haram: The Socio-Economic Drivers*, London 2015, p. 84.

¹¹ M. Yahya, *Africa's unique vulnerability to violent extremism*, 11.01.2017, <<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2017/1/11/Africa-s-unique-vulnerability-to-violent-extremism.html>> (31.01.2018).

¹² C. Gaffey, *Which Jihadi Groups Operate in Africa's Sahel Region?*, Newsweek.com, 6.06.2017, <<http://www.newsweek.com/isis-africa-al-qaeda-africa-boko-haram-621443>> (31.01.2018).

¹³ J. Wirtschaftfer, K. J. Gadiaga, *Africa becomes the new battleground for ISIS and al-Qaeda as they lose ground in Mideast*, Usatoday.com, 25.10.2017,

Lack of confidence apparently sets a reputation issue on national, regional and even global levels. One may be able to assume that lack of confidence in what is preached by regular norms could reshape trajectory of loyalty. It could be assumed that the consequences might, in reflection, keep the affected regions under the stigma of lasting isolation to best practices which are normally the standard.

Potential impact beyond host territories

Globalizing world has gradually been affirming some of the typical specifics of informational society as seen by Alvin Toffler in “The Third Wave”. Significance of information as bargaining chip would discover more and more flexible channels to offspring and to connect those hungrier and hungrier for it in a larger and larger volume. Social networks with accessible news feed as well as humans’ growing mobility in global aspect are able to sustain public agenda whereas messages require next to zero resource in order to be convertible. This all neutralizes the chances for their effect to stay purely regional. Information about smouldering terrorist movements around the globe may potentially cement host’s image of a place which is objectively challenged to offer sustainable (and predictable) business climate which may and should, in the long run, help produce a rationale for followers. The image of the mythical leader, the soldier who is heavily armed, powerful, distant and practically unreachable whilst still accessible and close to the souls of some of the most vulnerable groups does – in contrast – seemingly compensate the subjective sense of productive social anchor’s absence.

Counter terrorist measures should be able to include namely this subjective, the face-to-face (before peer-to-peer) diagnosis and work on the issue starting with the very root of the issue. Handling symptoms may not merely mean over investment of resources; it may eventually encourage meaning and power of the mythical social ascetic determined to a civilizational choice by radical means which would already have been justified in the minds of those who would follow or suffer them.

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