

Decentralized Terrorism: Ramifications for a Centralized International System

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Abstract

As terrorism becomes more diffuse and pervasive, it becomes more difficult for state sponsors to control terrorist activity and more difficult to enact effective unilateral counterterrorism measures. Since the end of World War II and starting with the Bretton Woods era there has been a concerted effort to embrace an interdependent world order, intended, in part, to mitigate hostilities throughout the international system. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent transition into the war on terrorism marked a paradigmatic shift in the international arrangement, aligning centralized organizations, composed primarily of nation-states, under a more unified world order. The international war on terrorism forces terrorist organizations to decentralize by forcing terrorist leadership to sever direct operational coordination with lower echelons. The diffuse nature of terrorism requires a multilateral response, which further solidifies all centralized organizations and results in a more centralized international system to combat the threat from decentralized and autonomous networks of disaffected individuals.

Key Terms: Terrorism, centralized, decentralized, international system, network, al Qaeda.

Introduction

There has been an increased decentralization of terrorism with the emergence of the war on terror, which mitigates the state-terrorist relationship – affecting state sponsors of terrorism as well as unilateral counterterrorism objectives – by diminishing a state’s direct contact with and control over terrorist entities. This paper will argue that the decentralization of terrorism negatively affects state sponsored terrorism as well as unilateral anti-terrorism measures by limiting access to the hierarchic power structure found in traditional organizations. The war on terrorism has the potential to solidify all centralized organizations – including traditional state sponsors of terrorism like Syria, organizations founded upon terrorism like Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as countries like the United States – through the benefits of international cooperation and the increasing cost of employing terrorist tactics.

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The transition will be gradual and, like all social constructs, the process will be full of nuance. There is no denying that the international landscape is changing the relationship between states and organizations that employ terrorist tactics; the international community should focus on the commonalities found in centralization and costs incurred from the use of terrorism. Carl Bockstette outlines the challenges facing centralized entities in asymmetrical conflict: “These are conflicts between parties that show... an imbalance in forces, a different determination/motivation, a different legitimization, a different application of methods and a difference in the quality or character of methods themselves. Asymmetrical conflicts are usually waged in a changing, asynchronous and unpredictable manner.”¹ The international system should actively and openly solidify cooperation between centralized global organizations by isolating and alienating decentralized terrorist networks. The war on terrorism has significantly altered the cost-benefit of state association with the tactic of terrorism.

The Changing State-Terrorism Relationship

State sponsors of terrorism and terrorist organizations have always had a dynamic relationship constantly in flux, based largely on the strategic interests of all parties involved. In essence, state sponsors of terrorism change routinely because states and terrorist organizations change. “States reduce or end their support for terrorist groups due to changes in their own goals, because of outside pressure, or (more rarely) because the terrorist group itself changes.”² Since terrorism can be a tool in the arsenal of a state’s strategy, the state uses terrorism for specific ends. When the state’s goals change, or the international landscape changes that requires the state to change its tactics, they may change their relationship towards terrorist organizations.

When a terrorist organization gains too much prominence a state may deescalate their support to minimize the freedom and power of the terrorist group. “Syria has reined in Hizballah and Palestinian groups when they interfered with Damascus’ gambits during the peace process in the 1990s, Tehran halted anti-US terrorism in the Gulf because it feared a repeat of Khobar Towers would lead to a US attack and multilateral sanctions, and Pakistan has forced Kashmiri groups to assume a lower profile in order to appease the United States after September 11.”³ It can be said that states change their relationship towards terrorist groups often and for various reasons.

State sponsored terrorism is based on a number of strategic, ideological, and/or foreign and domestic motivations. Therefore, if any of these reasons change, for either the state or the terrorist group, then the relationship between them will change. The issue is complicated further when a “unitary actor” model is abandoned. That is, when the state is no longer considered a single actor because its component factions are acting with divergent strategies and goals, then the relationship between that state and terrorist groups tend to often be in flux.

The complex relationship between states and terrorist groups must be clearly defined and understood, and recognizing the inadequate application of a unitary actor model to states and terrorist organizations is crucial to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. The ultimate responsibility in mitigating terrorism falls on the state. “All strategies place primary responsibility on sovereign states that have jurisdiction over terrorist activities within their borders. Many states are well equipped to combat terrorism. Others are weak and require assistance.”⁴ Counterterrorism tactics will differ depending on the state-terrorism relationship. It

is just as important to recognize state sponsored terrorism as it is to recognize what constitutes an unwilling state. That is, tactics used to inhibit state sponsorship obviously will not necessarily be effective on an unwilling state. Unwilling host states are still threats in the counterterrorism venture, and in many cases are severe threats.

Somalia and Yemen may be considered unwilling host states that pose a significant threat to world security with the operations of Al Shabab and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Tactics applied to these regions should differ from tactics applied to strong state supporters of terrorism, such as Iran's connection to Hizballah in Lebanon.⁵ Therefore, the reason these categories should be understood and separated is not an argument of semantics, but a substantive argument dictated by the varied tactics needed to combat the various terrorist organizations.

In general, terrorism is a tactic used by weak networks to revolt against an overarching power structure and not a strategy of long-term objectives. This distinction is important to a comprehensive understanding of terrorist organizations and their strategic objectives. It should also be noted that terrorism is a tactic in the arsenal of state sponsors, which use terrorism for strategic objectives such as attaining or maintaining regional dominance.⁶ The strategies of state sponsors of terrorism generally revolve around regional or geopolitical positioning.

The tactical categorization of terrorism further complicates the term's broad-based application, since many, if not most, organizations have employed such tactics at one time or another.⁷ Also, since tactics are utilized in pursuit of overall strategies they can oftentimes change in degree and frequency. Perhaps this is one reason the state-terrorist relationship is constantly changing, even though the general application of terrorist tactics remains constant. The change in applying terrorist tactics has markedly changed the relationship of state sponsors of terrorism since the paradigmatic shift of September 11, 2001 and the war on terrorism. The international system has inexorably changed, causing the decentralization of terrorist networks and mitigating the benefits reaped from state sponsorship.

Inspiration Without Command

An understanding of the extent to which nefarious leaders play in the role of a terrorist network is essential with the diminished efficacy of centralized terrorist leadership. A greater international offensive against terrorism seems to have caused a major bifurcation in the potential structure of terrorist groups. Generally, al Qaeda and other decentralized organizations tend to further decentralize and pervade the globe in a myriad of manifestations, sometimes with commonality in name only. These groups tend to be more ideological and more extreme in its uncompromising posture and have typically been categorized as "new terrorism". Cody Brown argues that the term "new terrorism" is a misnomer since there really isn't anything new about it, as well as the fact that terrorism since 11 September 2001 has impacted terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, much differently than al Qaeda. "The new terrorism is believed to be terrorism that is motivated less by political goals and more by religious fanaticism."⁸ It seems advantageous to distinguish between the two entities and acknowledge the differing roles of their central leadership.

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Hierarchical terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah have much different leadership roles than those of al Qaeda. An increasingly concerted international war on terrorism is likely to force structured, pragmatic organizations to legitimize their role in the political process, while decentralized networks will tend to further fragment and defy international pressure. Carl Conetta has pointed out that any operational direction in Al Qaeda was long ago relegated to inspiration and abstract rhetoric. “Since the onset of the U.S. “global war on terrorism”, the operational capacity of the original “Al Qaeda” centered around Osama bin-Laden has been significantly degraded.”⁹ As al Qaeda increasingly decentralize, multilateral strategies must be adopted to combat the threat that persists as too diffuse and pervasive for effective unilateral action. While strategies to further legitimize the remaining centralized terrorist organizations should center on the benefits of international recognition and officialdom.

Therefore, the enduring threat posed by decentralized networks has little to do with tangible tactics of direct operations and everything to do with rallying sparse but diffuse ideologues across the globe. “The current al Qaeda therefore exists more as an ideology that has become a vast enterprise – an international franchise with like-minded local representatives loosely connected to a central ideological or motivational base but advancing the remaining center’s goals at once simultaneously and independently of each other.”¹⁰ The crux of the matter is that the tactics employed by decentralized networks are abstract and intangible, and therefore require a counterterrorism strategy that is more comprehensive, sustained, and multilateral.

Networks and the New Paradigm

The term “new terrorism” usually defines the type of diffuse and pervasive kind of terrorism most common in a post 9/11 world. Some of the characteristics applied to this term seem convincing, but its application may be too specific since the decentralization of terrorism since 2001 does not necessitate apolitical, uncompromising and religious ideology. Although these qualities may indeed be present in some aspects of terrorism since the war on terrorism began, it seems limited and counterproductive to apply such a narrow definition to autonomous cells that follow intangible guidance rather than the traditional modus operandi of following direct operational objectives from the top echelon. “RAND analysts have characterized this shift as a move towards a more “network” oriented structure by the new terrorist groups.”¹¹ The hierarchy found in some traditional terrorist organizations has now been fragmented due to the international response following the 9/11 attacks. The resulting networks are much more difficult to combat, but the resulting lack of control by state sponsors of terrorism drives a wedge between the traditional sponsor and the terrorist organization.

A narrow definition of new terrorism, however, will only tend to oversimplify the current era. Cody Brown analyzes the common understanding of new terrorism and its limitations:

A terrorist organization is thought to fit within the new terrorism paradigm if it possesses the following traits: motives are religious rather than political, it has an organizational structure that is non-hierarchical and lacks constituent constraints, it is fanatical rather than rational, and has emerged within the last ten or fifteen years.¹²

Such a precise definition of new terrorism may have its benefits, but terrorism in the 21st century is likely to share only one of the above mentioned characteristics Brown mentions: the non-

hierarchical network. This is because terrorism is a tactic used to further overall strategic objectives, and the war on terrorism has made hierarchical structure too easily destabilized to be effective while the strategies of these networks remain diverse and multifaceted. As President George W. Bush pointed out in September 2006, “The terrorists who attacked us on September 11th, 2001, are men without conscience – but they’re not madmen. They kill in the name of a clear and focused ideology, a set of beliefs that are evil but not insane.”¹³ There seems to be a misunderstanding of terrorist networks by excluding rational deliberation from the “new terrorism” dialogue. By virtue of being decentralized, networks may not necessarily be motivated by religion alone, and may not follow irrational decision-making.

Whether or not the term new terrorism is aptly applied to the current era is a matter of definition, but the evidence indeed points to an increase in decentralized terrorist operations that are characterized by more frequency but fewer fatalities per operation. For example, the Madrid bombing of 11 March 2004 and the London bombing of 7 July 2005 both indicate a diffuse organizational structure involving relatively soft targets and less planning than would previously have been expected. “The two successful bombings, both coming a year or more after the onset of the Iraq war, were the worst of their kind experienced in Western Europe in more than 15 years. The responsible cells had only thin organizational links to Al Qaeda – or none at all, in one case.”¹⁴ State sponsors of terrorism cannot afford to be linked with an entity that requires little structural support, little planning, and no overarching direction from top leadership. The costs of sponsoring such entities are no longer outweighed by the benefits.

The bottom line seems to be that, although terrorism has always changed with the changing international landscape, the most notable change is in the landscape itself. That is, the end of the Cold War and the international war on terrorism has changed, significantly reducing the benefits of state sponsorship. “Iran, Syria, Pakistan, and others remain active [state sponsors of terrorism], but no comparable sponsors have emerged to take the place of those who have abandoned support for terrorism.”¹⁵ As state sponsored control of terrorist activities diminishes, the liability states could incur by sponsoring terrorism is increased as terrorist organizations become increasingly decentralized and autonomous.

The traditional reason for state sponsored terrorism should be clearly outlined if a better understanding of decentralization is to be expected. Doron Zimmermann wrote in 2004:

We should first know who (actors, motives, and objectives) and what (organizations and capabilities) we are dealing with before jumping to conclusions, comparing and referencing fragments of information with a known, but possibly inapplicable, body of knowledge and committing resources to protect and counteract on that basis.¹⁶

The intent of this paper is not to outline all the myriad actors and organizations concerning international terrorism. Suffice to say these characteristics are significant and, as with all studies of human interaction, understanding causality in the state-terrorism relationship is complex and multifaceted. Decentralization is the single most revealing characteristic of terrorism of the 21st century and must be viewed concomitantly with the centralized organizations that comprise the international system.

Understanding State Sponsorship

Generally, states sponsor terrorism to enhance long-term strategic interests and is typically used as a tactic alongside other measures, such as diplomacy. “There is no single, overarching reason that states support terrorist groups. For different states, there is a different strategic, ideological, and domestic mix.”¹⁷ When the strategic interests change – for the state and the terrorist organization – or the cost-benefit of state sponsorship is no longer worthwhile, the tactic of terrorism can change or diminish completely.

Domestic politics, foreign policy, and ideology are the most common causes of state sponsored terrorism, and when international pressure disrupts the top echelon of a terrorist organization the ramifications for a state sponsor can be significant. “Looking at the aggregate indicators, our analysis suggests that about half of the movements (slightly more than fifty percent) continue with “business as usual” after a crisis in leadership. At first glance, this suggests that something other than the leader is critical for group cohesion.”¹⁸ The strategic interests of states that sponsor terrorism can become significantly strained when the terrorist leadership is disconnected from controlling the entirety of their organization. Just as individual states find ever more difficulty in unilaterally combating terrorist networks, states that sponsor terrorism find diminished returns in providing support for entities that are leaderless.

No matter what the direct cause of state sponsorship, the broad reason centers on power and control for both the state and the terrorist organization. As the hierarchy within an organization deteriorates, control over low-level operatives also deteriorates, which contributes directly to the loss of control a state has over a terrorist proxy. This is because state sponsorship relies on influencing the leadership within terrorist organizations, which in turn influence the rest of the organization. Without a hierarchy to relay tactical objectives, a terrorist organization will be less influenced by state sponsorship because it is less influenced by the chain of command.

The specific causes of state sponsored terrorism is varied and complex, but the general reasons why states use terrorist organizations as a tactic is founded upon the need for dominance and influence, whether globally, regionally, or domestically. Although the decentralization of terrorism may produce obstacles to anti-terrorism measures, the benefits to state sponsorship will diminish and can be leveraged against traditional state sponsors. “The fact that terrorist groups are more autonomous, and their networks more decentralized, means that international cooperation will be even more essential in defeating them.”¹⁹ Paradoxically, the more decentralized and diffuse terrorism becomes, the more the international system must be unified in order to combat the nefarious threat of terrorism; this dynamic will alienate states from sponsoring terrorism and should be used by the international system to push decentralized terrorism to the fringes of the international landscape.

Intelligence and International Unity

In many respects, the diffuse nature of terrorism lends itself to criminality rather than war. That is, an increasing number of small terrorist operations, acting outside the parameters of a centralized power structure, have the ability to function within society without being detected. The characteristics of such a threat bare more similarity to criminality than to traditional warfare. “With grassroots origins, the adversary will morph and adapt, regroup, generate new leadership,

shift geographic locus, adjust tactics, and evolve into a collection of cells and networks different from the ones we have engaged fairly successfully since September 11.”²⁰ Such an amorphous enemy requires a unified international intelligence sharing, which can be daunting for such a diverse international landscape.

The United States has tried to bridge the intelligence gap within the U.S. bureaucracy by centralizing information sharing and its application with the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center. As Charles N. Davis points out, “The decentralized intelligence gathering of old had an upside as far as independent analysis is concerned.”²¹ The centralized organization of intelligence gathering has a tendency to constrain qualitative assessment by formalizing information into rigid parameters. The unification of international and domestic intelligence should not allow itself to be dehumanized, which can inhibit creative thinking through unyielding formal protocol.

The greatest challenge throughout the world of centralized states is to understand the importance of intelligence gathering to combat decentralized threats. Dabruzzi and Gartenstein-Ross note that, “Bureaucratic intelligence agencies have trouble keeping up with cells that are disconnected and on the move, making it almost impossible to uproot an entire decentralized network.”²² This is a challenge that will continue as the war on terrorism persists, but it is a challenge that can be used as leverage against potential state sponsors of terrorism, since traditional sponsors will also have similar difficulties in influencing terrorist networks.

The characteristics of decentralized terrorism are similar to criminal elements that pervade society without any overt direction from organizational leadership. “The causes of terror are sociological and political, and they are more analogous to the origins of international criminal syndicates than to the causes of wars among states.”²³ This paper does not address the issue of terrorism and the criminal justice judiciary process, and does not necessarily advance the notion of criminal prosecution for all terrorist cases. However, just as international cooperation is essential to combat other international criminal enterprises, such as the illicit drug trade and human trafficking, the unification of interagency intelligence and international intelligence is essential to the anti-terrorism measures required in the 21st century. “If American police and public safety agencies are to face and overcome the threat of terrorist activities, they must dramatically change their policies, their training, their operational practices and their relationships with each other.”²⁴ Without a unified domestic and international effort on all levels, the decentralized terrorist threat will not be contained.

As F.G. Hoffman wrote in late 2001, “The existing intelligence structure is a patchwork, born in the early days of the Cold War, and it requires serious reengineering if it is to appropriately advise and reduce uncertainty for the national leaders and policy-makers.”²⁵ There has been considerable restructuring to the intelligence community since the beginning of the war on terrorism, but without continued restructuring the intelligence community will not be able to combat the ever-increasing threat posed by autonomous terrorist cells.

The decentralization of tactics employed during wartime is also a challenge for democratically responsible governments. “The threat of terrorism... has had an will continue to have a harmful effect on the capacity to maintain democratic forms of policing where they exist and will hamper and stifle the movement toward democratic forms of policing in societies

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seeking that goal.”²⁶ Obviously, checks and balances must be maintained to ensure proper democratic policing and limit the infringement on constitutionally guaranteed rights. “In principle, no one disputes that anti-terrorism measures should protect the values that anchor democratic processes and personal security in the United States.”²⁷ Precaution should be maintained within each nation while simultaneously pursuing international cooperation and shared intelligence.

The closer the international system comes to a unitary actor in its counterterrorism strategies, the more effective international efforts will be at mitigating the threat posed by diffuse and decentralized terrorist organizations and cells. As Jacobson points out, “The fact that terrorist groups are more autonomous, and their networks more decentralized, means that international cooperation will be even more essential in defeating them.”²⁸ An effective response to the new terrorist threat would seem to suggest that the more solidified the international system, as well as the various factions within each nation, the more positive effect of counterterrorism efforts. “Commensurate with the decentralized and distributed form of the threat, a program of counter measures must be coordinated globally and rooted locally in nations around the world. Moreover, recognizing that transnational terrorist organizations depend on and exploit the gaps in international society, international cooperation must be seamless.”²⁹ The strategic objectives of the international community must be unified and be manifested in multilateral coordination and action.

Within each state, a smaller and more flexible military apparatus will be required to combat the diffuse terrorist threat. “In terms of defending against terrorism, more is not always better, and overreacting can pose almost as great a risk as not reacting at all.”³⁰ Terrorism in the 21st century requires a response that can pinpoint terrorist cells and adapt to an enemy that is always on the move and integrated within and throughout societies. Charles V. Peña argues that the wars of the current era must be fought with nimble, specialized resources. “Special forces rather than armor or infantry divisions will be the norm.”³¹ The international community must increase intangible considerations, such as international cooperation, while also reconfiguring tangible assets to meet the demands of asymmetrical warfare.

Attempts to use traditional warfare against diffuse and pervasive terrorist entities will result in diminished returns on a costly investment. For example, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been challenging for many reasons, but one major reason seems to be the attempt – especially in the early stages of each war – to approach the enemy as a centralized force, which cost the United States immensely. The New York Times reported on 26 February 2011: “Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates bluntly told an audience of West Point cadets on Friday that it would be unwise for the United States to ever fight another war like Iraq or Afghanistan, and that the chances of carrying out a change of government in that fashion again were slim.”³² Indeed, the new era of decentralized warfare requires a tactical reassessment by the traditional power structure.

A paradoxical aspect of effective anti-terrorism measures is that when the war on terrorism properly utilizes the decentralization of terrorism as an asset to unify the international community, it will force those nefarious networks to adapt through further decentralization, which will then increase their tolerance for counterterrorism measures. In effect, the more successful a country’s anti-terrorism strategy, the less effective it becomes and the more

decentralized the terrorist threat becomes. Paul R. Pillar writes of the evolving characteristics of terrorism:

The disciplined, centralized organization that carried out the September 11 attacks is no more... The small, secretive nature of terrorist plots and the indeterminate nature of the target – likely to become an even greater problem as the Islamic terrorist threat further decentralizes – have always made terrorism a particularly difficult target subject.³³

The most difficult issue facing counterterrorism decision-makers is finding the enemy and acting before they do. As the war on terrorism succeeds in hampering the centralized leadership of terrorist organizations, the international community must act with ever more multilateral action; unilateral action in any state's counterterrorism strategy is increasingly untenable. "Given the complexity and evolving nature of the threat, as well as the diversity of conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, combating international terrorism requires a comprehensive, multifaceted response at the global, regional, and local levels."³⁴ The requirement of a multifaceted global cooperation can be leveraged against any state sponsor of terrorism by exploiting the state sponsor's weakened relationship with terrorist organizations. In sum, the progressively more decentralized nature of terrorist networks hinders unilateral state methods of warfare, strengthens the need for international multilateralism, and simultaneously mitigates the control and influence of asymmetrical tactics traditionally afforded to state sponsors of terrorism. Intelligence gathering, communication, collaboration, and coordination are necessary for the international system to have the capacity to neutralize the threat from terrorism, and all centralized organizations, including traditional state sponsors of terrorism, must eventually be brought into the international system to share intelligence and mitigate the decentralized threat.

Changing Resource Requirements

The ability of networks to communicate and collaborate via the Internet and support of sustained financial backing are two resources that enable terrorist networks to continue to influence their loose knit following. As bureaucratic international entities attempt to form a concerted effort against terrorism, decentralized terrorism will increasingly rely upon the Internet to inspire and provide general guidance to small pockets of extremists throughout the world. "The mass media and especially the Internet have become the key enablers and the main strategic communication assets for terrorists and have ensured them a favorable communication asymmetry."³⁵ That is, the primary worth of a terrorist figurehead is to inspire and foment general animosity toward the overarching power structure, and a viable yet indirect form of communication is necessary to sustain such intangible tactics; the Internet provides the exact type of communication apparatus required for decentralized networks.

Irving Lachow and Courtney Richardson outline five key aspects of the Internet which contribute to terrorist operations:

First, it enables rapid communication... Second, Internet use is a low-cost proposition... Third, the ubiquity of the Internet means that small terrorist groups can have a global cyber presence that rivals that of much larger organizations... Fourth, the growth in bandwidth combined with development of new software has enabled unsophisticated users to develop and disseminate complex information via the Internet.. Finally, modern

encryption technologies allow Internet users to surf the web, transfer funds, and communicate anonymously – a serious (though not insurmountable) impediment to intelligence and law enforcement organizations trying to find, track, and catch terrorists.³⁶

Without this apparatus a centralized hierarchy would be more necessary for communication and influence. At the same time financial backing, while still a necessity, can be diminished in magnitude as a result of cheap, convenient and anonymous forms of communication. Victor Comras, speaking at the Center for Contemporary Conflict Conference, was noted as stating, “The picture we got from al Qaeda was that it drew on multiple sources, and its disparate cells drew on whatever it could – and it’s now having difficult time raising funds, and that the old al Qaeda, the base, may be facing a funding shortage.”³⁷ The necessity for terrorist groups to attain funding remains a significant and vulnerable consideration, despite the complimentary effects of the Internet.

With a more concerted effort, the war on terrorism can force states to reconsider financing terrorism, which can cause decentralized networks to look for smaller but more numerous financial backing. Carl Conetta wrote in 2002 that, “On a global scale, the new war is substantially affecting flows of foreign aid and investment, the transfer of military goods and services, the character and focus of counter-proliferation efforts, the implementation of sanction regimes, and the status of efforts to support human rights and advance democratic governance.”³⁸ State sponsored terrorism is the single most beneficial asset in the terrorist network’s resource allocation, primarily through financing and sanctuary, and a sustained threat requires tenable resources.³⁹

The changing resource requirements of terrorist entities are notable, since the Internet enables cheap communication and influence throughout the entire globe. “These groups are becoming more sophisticated in their use of technology, particularly the Internet, to improve their global reach, intelligence collection, and operational capacity.”⁴⁰ There are, however, significant resource requirements that even decentralized networks must consider in employing its strategy. “Terrorist groups require extensive resources to train, equip, and pay operatives; bribe officials, support members’ families; secure materials; and publicly promote the cause.”⁴¹ Some of these resources may be alleviated with ever increasing decentralization, but they will never be eliminated completely. Terror cells, no matter how isolated and autonomous, will always require materials and outside support.

As states find less benefit in the sponsoring of terrorist activities, their official channels for financial distribution will decrease. As noted above, terrorist organizations are looking to diversify their financial sources and what support that is found is usually distributed to low-level operatives rather than the traditional top echelon. In the long run, the Internet will continue to enhance the abilities of terrorist operations and diminish the need for extensive funding, but financial backing on some level will still be required, and the likelihood that terrorists will have access to state support and other lush sources of funding will continue to diminish.

Remaining Centralized Groups

Bruce Hoffman writes of the 5 progressive steps a terrorist organization typically attempts to fulfill in its strategic objectives: attention, acknowledgement, recognition, authority,

and governance. “While some terrorist movements have been successful in achieving the first three objectives, rarely in modern times has any group attained the last two. Nonetheless, all terrorists exist and function in hopes of reaching this ultimate end”⁴² The divergent qualities of terrorist entities fall into two distinct categories: Centralized organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and decentralized networks such as al Qaeda. Those that remain centralized will find it necessary to shed overt associations with terrorism in order to obtain and maintain positive international relations. In other words, hierarchical terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah should be expected to undergo a slow process of legitimization in order to garner the necessary internationally recognized authority and governance.

This process is slow and cumbersome, and some – if not most – of these organizations will continue to employ terrorist tactics based on the cost-benefits associated with overall international and domestic objectives. Of course, the international community must ensure the cost of employing terrorism is far greater than its benefits. There seems to be a window of opportunity for the international community to further pressure states to abandon their sponsorship of terrorism. For example, Syria’s departure from Lebanon is significant, and may be evidence of the anti-Syrian sentiments in Lebanon following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri as well as the limited influence of the Syrian government under the Bashar regime. “Paradoxically, there is little love today for Syria among Hizballah’s supporters. They see Syria as having constrained Hizballah’s political potential.”⁴³ However, the evidence does not indicate that the Syria-Hezbollah relationship has changed significantly. Their strategic interests are still very much complimentary and, without further international pressure, will remain so for the foreseeable future. The withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon seems to demonstrate a weakness in the current Syrian regime, but it does not indicate a complete withdrawal in their state sponsorship of terrorism.

The international system should leverage more pressure against states like Syria when they are most susceptible to the costs of state sponsored terrorism. That is not to say that Syria should be destabilized by the international system, but the pressure should focus on thwarting state sponsored terrorism through diplomatic means. A weakened state, such as the current state of Syria and other “Arab Spring” nations, may be more susceptible to international consensus in order to avoid compounding a domestic security situation.⁴⁴ Hezbollah is becoming more and more legitimized through the Lebanese political structure, and therefore more independent and more difficult for Syria to control. At the same time, Syrian influence throughout the entire region seems mitigated since the transition to the Bashir Assad regime in 2000.

As mentioned previously, whether a definition of “new terrorism” requires religious fundamentalism or not, we are certainly in a new era of terrorism since the 11 September 2001. “This is a different kind of war that requires a different paradigm... The lesson for the war on terrorism is not that aggression is unnecessary or should be avoided. In war, aggression is inevitable and this war is no different. But the weapons and skills for the un-war will be different.”⁴⁵ The war on terrorism has mitigated the benefits of state sponsored terrorism, both regarding decentralizing networks as well as the remaining centralized, pragmatic organizations. It is dependent upon world leaders like the United States to coax traditional state sponsors of terrorism into conceding to the fact that terrorism is not a cost-beneficial tactic to a state’s strategic interests. Realizing the inherent qualities of this new era will coalesce centralized organizations and continue to alienate and mitigate the threat from terrorist networks.

Conclusion

The international war on terrorism has many ramifications for 21st century conflict, and the centralized organizations of the international system must be viewed in relation to the threat from decentralized terrorism. It seems that the war on terrorism is likely to obligate all centralized organizations – nation-states, traditional state sponsors of terrorism, and any remaining centralized terrorist organizations – the potential to realize more commonalities than differences. As the Figure 1 (p. 13) illustrates, the international community has the opportunity to isolate decentralized networks from the remaining centralized organizations of the world through long-term, comprehensive, and multilateral action.

A significant caveat remains: a rigid analysis of the centralized/decentralized dichotomy can lead to an oversimplification of the international arrangement. Causality in any study of human relations must be flexible and based on probability. It is essential that the international community must take responsibility for solidifying centralized organizations.

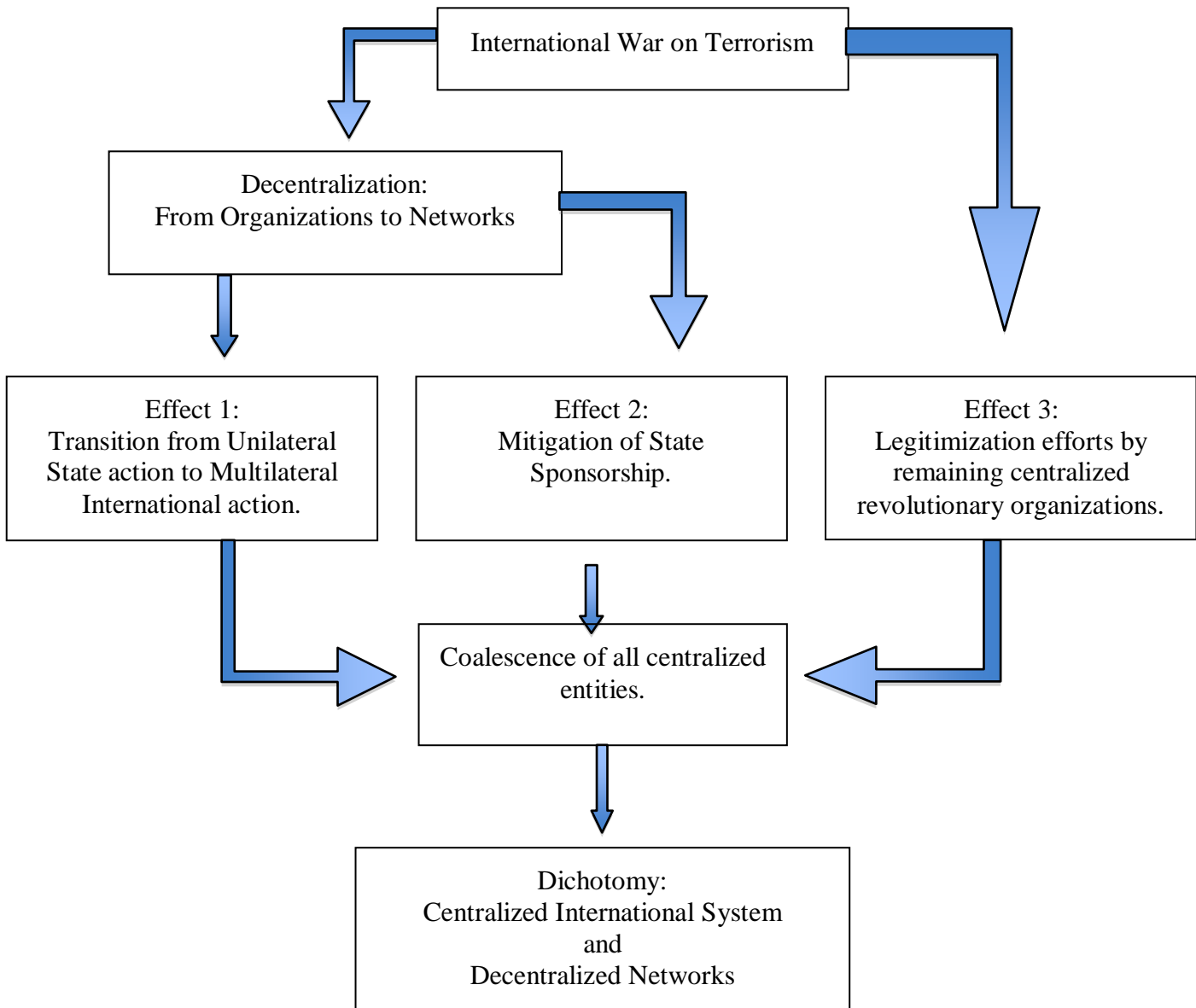
Generalizations can be beneficial if recognized for what they are: The broad based assessment of categories in order to compare similarities and differences. It is crucial to remember that in human relations there are always a myriad of exceptions. Robert D. Sloane warns of the pitfalls of phrases like “international war on terrorism”, “It crudely lumps together diverse phenomena within a single legal framework, obscures relevant differences, and mistakenly implies that the military instrument should be the primary strategy to address the threats posed by modern transnational terrorist networks typified by al Qaeda.”⁴⁶ Human relations will always require individual considerations; it is up to the international community to find commonalities in the various transnational entities in order to move forward productively.

State sponsored terrorism is vulnerable to the pressures of the 21st century international landscape due to the legitimization efforts of centralized terrorist organizations and the further disconnection between terrorist leaders and their decentralized terrorist networks. The unilateral state action typified in traditional warfare will be replaced by multilateral international or regional action due to the decentralized nature of the terrorist threat. These possibilities should be taken into consideration with the movement toward greater legitimization by traditional terrorist organizations. This process must be emphasized on the international level and will contain many exceptions from states and terrorist entities that defy the negative cost-benefits of state sponsored terrorism; the process is also long-term, unfolding over the course of decades.

The threat from autonomous, disaffected individuals may be manifested under the guise of anti-Americanism or anti-Western sentiments, but the real long-term threat is aimed at the international system and the complex interdependence that has evolved since World War II and accelerated since the end of the Cold War. The decentralization of terrorism reveals many challenges to the international system, but these challenges can be turned into strengths if the international system focuses on the benefits of centralized cooperation.

Figure 1:

International Solidification of Centralized Organizations



- The international war on terrorism forces terrorist organizations to decentralize by forcing terrorist leadership to sever direct operational coordination with lower echelon.
- Effect 1: Unilateral action is not efficient, even for world powers such as the United States, resulting in international coordination and multilateralism.
- Effect 2: State Sponsorship is weakened by a loss of state control over the leaders of terrorist networks.
- Effect 3: International pressure forces organizations, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, to legitimize through official political structures.
- Any organization remaining centralized will have increasingly more commonalities leading to a furtherance of a complex interdependent system. (e.g. U.S., Hamas, traditional state sponsors, etc.)
- Decentralized networks such as al Qaeda will increasingly differ from and be opposed to centralized entities like the United States, Hezbollah, and Syria.

Notes

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