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The Psychosocial Sources of Terrorism

The process of the emergence and expansion of terrorism results from broadly taken psychosocial factors.¹ Amongst others, it is closely related to the problems of prejudices, stereotypes, xenophobia, hatred, hostility, intolerance, sense of wrong, inequality and threat, etc. Terrorism is frequently rooted in a given group's assessment of a certain attitude or value, one which is considered paramount and therefore requires that all other matters be unreservedly subordinated to it.

The simplified division of reality is a significant psychosocial factor in the development and shaping of terrorism. The essential principle here is the division of the world into us and them. This division is fundamental for affiliation with a given group, community or nation. It is frequently intensified by the following three attributes:

- the above division is considered absolute, whereas the sources for the division are sought not in objective reality but in its subjective perception;
- the antagonisms and contradictions between the world of 'us' and that of 'them' are assumed to be unavoidable (e.g. those between the West and Islam, or between the rich North and poor South);
- there are no arguments more profound than the distinction between 'ours' – 'yours' – 'mine' – 'theirs', etc.

A. Hertz claims that the above assumptions generate the division of reality into "the world of our own objects and that of strangers", alien objects. The world of my own objects includes my (e.g. ethnic or religious) group and what belongs there. The rest involves the world of strange objects".²

An individual is frequently considered to belong to a group because he/she shares the same views, speaks the same language, is of the same religion, has the same skin color or because his/her parents have formerly been acknowledged as group members. The same mechanism is also applied in reverse. The problem of strangeness and ostra-

¹ See: A. Schmid, A. Jongman, *Political Terrorism, A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature*, Amsterdam–Oxford–New York 1988; *Meeting the Challenges of Global Terrorism*, ed. by D. Das, P. Kratcoski, Lanham–Boulder–New York–Oxford 2003, p. 139 i n.; N. Kressel, *Mass Hate: The Global Rise of Genocide and Terror*, Perseus Books 1996; J. Ross, *A Model of the Psychological Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism*, "Journal of Peace Psychology" 1996, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 129–141; Z. Ratajczak, *Contemporary Terrorism from the Psychological Perspective*, in: *Contemporary Society and Global Terrorism*, Poznań 2004.

² A. Hertz, *Socjologia nieprzedawniona*, Warszawa 1992, p. 381.

cism, and the consequent hostility or terrorism is permanent, universal and extraterritorial. It is closely related to the issue of ethnic myths, such as that of an enemy, of blood or of origin. Stanisław Ossowski's observation, made even before World War II, remains highly relevant: "Mythical beliefs are more than the unjustified or irrational beliefs imposed on us by a social group, these beliefs are usually not confronted with experiential criteria. Such beliefs may coexist with the awareness of facts that actually contradict the beliefs."³

1. Chauvinism, Xenophobia, Prejudices and Stereotypes

The above issues are clearly related to the problems of chauvinism, xenophobia, prejudices and stereotypes that pertain to religion, culture, ethnicity, etc. To a varied degree all these elements contribute to increased aggression, intolerance, discrimination as well as to the emergence and reinforcement of radical attitudes, including terrorism. This may be observed in Jewish–Arabic, English–Irish, Spanish–Basque relations and in many other cases.

Moreover, there are serious and multiple implications observed between the above issues, both in the realistic and theoretical realm. These are emphasized by some sociologists who claim that in many instances prejudices are expressed by means of stereotypes, whereas stereotypes frequently generate prejudices.

Among the main features shared by stereotypes and prejudices are their vitality, durability and transition from generation to generation. They frequently apply to the same national, religious, cultural or political group.

It would not be feasible to analyze all the above factors and the interactions between them in a brief study, yet it should be emphasized how strong their relation to the local situation is in respect of economics, politics, society or historical background.

2. Other Psychosocial Factors

The following may also be considered to be significant psychosocial factors that influence the emergence and manifestation of terrorism:

- A. **Fear.** It may be rooted in a very broad spectrum of reasons. Similarly, it may have various manifestations and results. Depending on the situation and the subject, fear is either destructive and paralyzing, or just the opposite, it may stimulate and inspire activity. Whatever the result is, the emotions it gives rise to tend to be negative and not conducive to making rational decisions. Intimidation is one of the most significant purposes of all kinds of terrorist groups. They frequently assume that by using

³ S. Ossowski, *Więź społeczna i dziedzictwo krwi*, w: *Dziela*, Warszawa 1967, p. 138.

intimidation they will achieve their goals easier and faster by virtue of destabilization, paralysis or coercion into certain actions of states or groups of individuals. This may be evidenced by terrorist attacks (or their attempts) against the member states of the international coalition in Iraq.

- B. **Extreme pessimism.** It is frequently rooted in the social, economic or political problems of a given country. It is usually a compound of multiple factors that may include particularly significant opinions (whether erroneous or justified) that, say, the political system is evolving in the wrong direction, transformation is not yielding benefits, the state is not managed properly, is corrupt or dependent on foreign capital, that reforms are harmful or imposed from abroad, etc. Such a situation could or can still be observed in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Algeria, Yemen, Indonesia, Columbia, etc. Whether directly or indirectly, this has contributed to increased approval for populist groups and for those that call for violence, such as terrorist groups.⁴

These elements are produced by the clash of reality with the usually erroneous belief that the situation in the country can be reformed quickly, whereas the religious, cultural, and other principles may be respected or restored for everybody's benefit. This is shown in the ideas of Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, the Red Brigades, Shining Path, etc.

- C. **A sense of ideological emptiness – extreme manifestation of values.** After the Cold War ended the old systems, doctrines and ideologies, as well as their slogans, were shown to be no longer valid. The former axiological system collapsed. Many individuals experienced a sense of spiritual, moral and ideological void. For some of them, an alternative was provided by various extreme attitudes or ideologies, such as nationalism, fundamentalism, terrorism, etc. Like communism or anti-communism, they offer a clarified program and goals and clearly identified enemies – the cause of the entire misfortune.
- D. The issue of **the need for affiliation** is strictly related to the above. Isaiah Berlin refers to it when he claims that the need for affiliation or the possibility to be in and identify with a certain group is among the most important human needs. In his opinion this need has accompanied man for a very long time. Initially it manifested itself as affiliation with the clan, family or tribe; later on it assumed the form of affiliation with the nation or the state. Berlin says that the sense of affiliation usually fulfills a number of other fundamental needs, such as the need for security. In many cases the need for affiliation is the origin of a group that further develops, evolves

⁴ *Collateral Language, A User's Guide to America's New War*, ed. by J. Collins, R. Glover, New York–London 2002; L. Pettiford, D. Harding, *Terrorism the New World War*, London 2003; *Terrorism in Perspective*, ed. by P. Griset, S. Mahan, Thousand Oaks–London–New Delhi 2003.

and strengthens by means of a shared language, history or culture.⁵ There may be many more such stimuli, for example a common enemy, sense of danger, shared objectives, etc. As time goes by, this process may assume one of two scenarios. On the one hand the group integrates. On the other, we may observe an intensification and new differences between me and my group versus everybody else. An extreme situation involves the emergence of small groups, communities or organizations that isolate themselves from the outer world and are able to undertake extremist actions, including terrorist attacks (e.g. The Highest Truth). Another aspect is a specific emotional state that, when combined with religious, ethnic or political reasons, may lead to suicidal terrorist attacks, as is the case in the Middle East.

- E. **A sense of having been wronged, oppression, inequality, backwardness or prostration.** Frequently terrorism is also rooted in the conviction of being oppressed (in imagination or in reality), harmed, dominated or discriminated against. This may particularly be observed in underdeveloped states or regions where economic and social disproportion is highly significant. Another aspect of the differentiation is the conventional division into the countries of the rich North and the poor South, or into world ‘centers’ and ‘peripheries’.

The sense of backwardness may further be reinforced by the awareness that the differences are deepening, that there are no realistic possibilities that they will be erased soon, and a sense of inability to exert a rational influence on the shape and character of the international situation.

Let us take the example of the Northern hemisphere that is inhabited by approximately 25% of the global population, whereas 75% of the population live in the South. This juxtaposition becomes particularly expressive and meaningful when accompanied by certain economic ratios, such as the share in the consumption of the global output. The differences are yet more striking here as the North consumes 85% and the South 15% of global output. It should also be emphasized that the two ratios referred to above are dynamic. Certain statistics may change considerably even over quite short periods of time, and is often the case. These changes tend to be unfavorable for underdeveloped countries. With reference to the example above, it may be demonstrated that the proportion of the population living in the North is declining while simultaneously tending to increase its share of global consumption at the expense of the South.⁶

The above scenario frequently results in the terrorists’ demands (“Do what we say or else...”) or assumes that it is necessary to punish the culprits (e.g. other states, foreign corporations, local politicians and businessmen, etc.). The classic example

⁵ J. Berlin, *Nacjonalizm: zlekceważona potęga*, in: *Dwie koncepcje wolności*, Warszawa 1991, pp. 201–202.

⁶ *Północ-Południe, Konflikt czy współpraca?*, Warszawa 2001; *Der Nord-Süd-Konflikt*, “Informationen zur Politischen Bildung” 1982.

is the belief shared by some Islamic groups and organizations that the Arab community is taken advantage of (to take the issue of oil as an example) by Western countries, mainly the USA.

- F. **A sense of danger and insecurity.** The sense of danger may involve various realms of social life, such as cultural, religious or national identity, material, social or professional stability or the sense of security in general.

A decreased sense of security may be experienced by a whole society or by a directly endangered group. It emerges more or less spontaneously, making some people tend towards certain ideas, groups or structures. These will frequently be extremist or radical attitudes. This is clearly exemplified by intensified nationalistic trends in Central and Eastern Europe or by fundamentalist tendencies in the former USSR.

- G. **Hostility.** Hostility and friendship are two values that have accompanied man since the beginning of history. They are present both in the relationships between individuals and groups or nations.

Hostility may be rooted in the past, but it may also take advantage of all kinds of ongoing disputes or controversies, even seemingly trivial ones. The emergence and shaping of the roots of hostility has accurately been grasped by Czesław Mojsiewicz, who wrote; "In my opinion, wherever there are any elements of inequality or discrimination for whatever reason... there will exist hostility, political struggle, involving even military conflict."⁷ Hostility may result from a broad spectrum of reasons ranging from personality disorders, envy, humiliation or fear to political, economic or religious differentiation.

A controversial thesis concerning hostility has been proposed by David Gellman, who claims that hostility, or having an enemy, is a significant element of human nature that integrates a group and fulfills one of the most fundamental human needs – the need for an enemy.⁸

Samuel Huntington also mentions the same need with reference to the historic changes of 1989. Huntington observed that "the collapse of communism has meant the elimination of an enemy. However, an enemy is necessary, there can be no void. So the old enemies, the nearest ones, are being warmed up."⁹ This is proven by the revival of old conflicts or increased tensions in a given region. A certain, at least partial, recurrence may be observed with respect to terrorism, as well as many other so-

⁷ Cz. Mojsiewicz, *Przewyciężanie nacjonalizmu i wrogości między narodami w Europie*, in: *Przewyciężanie wrogości i nacjonalizmu w Europie*, ed. by Cz. Mojsiewicz, K. Glass, Toruń–Poznań 1993, pp. 11–16.

⁸ "Newsweek" 18 IX 1989.

⁹ See: K. Krzysztofel, *Kulturowe źródła konfliktów w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, in: *Nacjonalizm, Konflikty narodowościowe w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej*, ed. by S. Helnarski, Toruń 1994.

cial phenomena. The theory of economic cycles or political ‘terrorist waves’ and the concept of ‘The Syndrome of the 25-year Recurrence’¹⁰ reflect that.

Hostility and its related aspects are the undeniable stimuli for the revival and development of extremist attitudes and ideologies, such as fundamentalism, terrorism or nationalism, that lead to tensions, discrimination or conflicts.

H. Passivity. Passivity is a dangerous element that indirectly supports terrorism. It applies to individuals, groups, communities or whole societies which, for various reasons, approve of or do not oppose terrorist activities. The passivity of societies or their elite may in certain cases encourage the terrorists’ audacity; alternatively, it may be interpreted as a sign of intimidation, approval or helplessness.

This phenomenon has an exceptionally broad range as we may mention the passivity of societies, of state structures or even of international organizations. From time to time the UN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the African Union are accused of passivity or indecision when tackling various problems. In my opinion this claim is somewhat controversial and should be considered separately.

The issue of passivity should be examined in the context of such conditions and attitudes as the lack of appropriate preparation, experience, power or measures. The states that are fighting terrorism frequently apply outdated methods and undertake actions that are too general and thus insufficient, or they resort to techniques that are inadequate to their internal or international situation. Another scenario involves terrorist acts that are inspired by the state or taken advantage of for political purposes.

¹⁰ ‘The Syndrome of the 25-year Recurrence’. *His theory refers to the observation that in the 20th century every 25 years (1914–1939–1964–1989) a significant international event that seriously affected the world situation took place.*