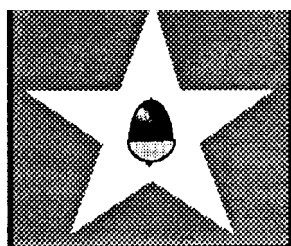# Conflict Studies Research Centre

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Perspectives on Ethno-Nationalist/ Separatist Terrorism

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Ethno-Nationalist/Separatist Terrorism

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There are fundamental differences between terrorism inspired by ethnicity and religion. Whilst attention is currently focussed on the latter, separatist violence has not disappeared forever.

Ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorism is not exclusively a modern phenomenon; in the first century AD, ethnic terrorism was used by two Jewish groups in Judaea which wanted to incite the local population to rise against the Roman occupiers.[1] But it was only in the colonial and neo-colonial era (1960s and 1970s) that terrorism came to be associated with ethno-nationalist/separatist groups.[2] During that period, terrorism was seen as paying off on the basis of successful violent campaigns launched and won by Begin in Israel (National Military Organization - Irgun), Makarios in Cyprus (National Organization of Cypriot Fighters - EOKA) and Ben Bella in Algeria (*Front de libération nationale* - FLN) - although other factors came into play that were arguably more relevant to their successes. The Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) terrorist activism between 1968 and 1980 further demonstrated to other nationalist movements that internationalizing their cause could be beneficial. The number of ethno-national/separatist terrorist groups active internationally therefore grew from three in 1968 to 30 in 1978.[3]

While ethno-nationalist/separatist groups dominated the terrorist agenda for most of the past sixty years, they now appear to have been displaced by an equally old form of terrorism, but one which is now more dangerous, transnational and ideological, such as that represented by *Al Qaeda* (the Base). These religious, messianic and apocalyptic organizations do not refrain from causing mass casualties to reach their ultimate goal. They are not seeking more political autonomy, independence or to prevail over a dominant ethnic group, but, for many, nothing less than the elimination of Western secularism and values (including their supporters) and their replacement by a monotheist faith.[4] The resurgence of this type of terrorism on such a violent scale over the last decade, especially when perceived as punishment, is unprecedented and is focusing the minds of the opponents of terrorism on its links with technology, weapons of mass destruction and mass casualties.[5]

Having said that, ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorist groups such as the *Euzkadi ta Azkatasuna* (Basque Homeland and Freedom - ETA), the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), and the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (popularly known as Hamas) continue their struggle, while others such as *Partiya Karkari Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Workers' Party - PKK) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are contemplating some kind of accommodation with their opponents. What lies ahead for this type of terrorist organization? Why is violence an option? Whereas terrorism appears to be a means to an end for both ethno-nationalist/separatist and religious, messianic and apocalyptic groups, its

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justification and scale differ. While the idea of compromise is anathema to the latter, what connects the former to violence? And can we put a stop to it? One strong line of argument to which I subscribe asserts that ethno-nationalist/separatist violence will not go away any time soon. Inequalities and past wrongs are simply too resilient in the minds of most minorities, and affected states have yet to devise effective grievance management and settlement strategies.[6] The contrary argument is that ethno-nationalist/separatist violence it is on the wane, since the colonization era within which it flourished has come to a close a while ago and that the violent groups outside this context will simply eventually be accommodated (eg, PIRA) or eliminated through law enforcement (eg, FLQ - *Front de libération nationale du Québec*).

In this discussion, "nationalism" and "nation" remain essentially disputed concepts. There is no agreement about what is nationalism or nation; attempts to satisfactorily define the latter in terms of a unique language, race or religious attributes (primordialism), for example, have been seriously challenged. A few notions have nonetheless captured the interest of various epistemic communities. One is that the "nation" is a relatively recent phenomenon, ineluctably linked to the Enlightenment period. Another brings to the fore the idea that nationalism is invariably about history, in the sense "that it writes its own, that it constructs an account of its origins and its past which legitimates the present and offers signposts for the future."[7] A nation, therefore, is an "imagined community", a notion aptly coined by Benedict Anderson. Yet, for others, nationalism can be various things, ranging from a process to a kind of sentiment or identity, a form of political rhetoric, an ideology or a type of socio-political movement. Nationalism is not inherently bad or good. For many, it was essential to the success of industrialism, capitalism and state-building, and remains so to legitimize our political order. For others, the "nation" is not the historical and political community assumed by modernists, but rather a cultural community conscious of its collective identity represented by a shared language, values, myths and symbols. Last but not least, one stream narrowly defines a nation as coterminous with ethnicity or blood lineage, and as a tool through which ethnic and cultural aspects are harnessed in opposition to others.[8]

Liberal thinkers have categorized "nation" as the study and interpretation of two types: the civic nation and the cultural nation. Civic nationalism is based on a non-ancestral common destiny and territoriality (the Canadian, French and American models, for instance), whereas cultural nationalism is based upon myths of common ancestry recognized through a common religion or language and leading to claims of self-determination. Ethnic nationalism is often used instead of cultural nationalism and refers either to similar myths and/or blood lineage (such as the German and Japanese models). It is worth noting that ethnic nationalism, "as all nationalisms, is cultural, but not all cultural nationalisms are ethnic".[9] Notwithstanding all these distinctions, one should not conclude that the civic nation is necessarily exempt from intolerance, paranoia or ethnic tensions. A case in point is the Kurdish problem in Turkey, where the Turkish government refuses to recognize the Kurds as a national minority. The problem is not one of ethnic exclusion, but of homogenization, or inclusion of a national minority into a larger national group.[10]

Empirical evidence shows that "nations" are rarely culturally or ethnically homogeneous, and that most are stateless. Yet, the use of the term "nation-states" implies congruence between nations as culturally distinctive units and states as self-governing political units.[11] It is this idealized alignment between state and

nation that gives legitimacy to the modern state and creates envy in stateless nations the world over, nationalism not being uniquely an attribute of the First World. In fact, the post-colonial Third World has been marked by liberation nationalism, first of a secular and increasingly of a religious nature. There too, nationalism remains a form of remedial political action where the congruence between nation and autonomy/statehood is sought.[12]

From a psychological perspective, large-group identity formation is perceived as a normal phenomenon, naturally evolving from particular circumstances, such as historical continuity, geography, a myth of common beginning and other shared events. Hence, how a particular group conceives of its ethnic identity is almost invariably an exercise in differentiation from other groups. Very often, one group's ethnic identity is reinforced by a *chosen trauma*, or the collective memory of a calamity that once affected the group's ancestors. A *chosen trauma*, such as the Serbs' 1389 defeat on *Kosovo Polje* (the Kosovo field, or plain),[13] can trigger a variety of responses to reverse the feelings of humiliation, loss and vengeance brought by the trauma, up to and including ethnic aggression against those deemed responsible. More precisely, such a trauma or severe dislocation can trigger "a psychological defence mechanism that requires the creation of an 'enemy-other', which becomes the repository of collective self-loathing, rage, and anxiety," leading to ethnic violence.[14] If a particular group feels anxious or repressed, it will cling more ardently to its ethnic identity, nationality or religion, the latter serving as protectors from further or deeper problems. A charismatic leader would feel a similar void, in that he would symbolize a large group's identity. Ethno-nationalists, in this framework, link their ethnic identity with the necessity to form a nation, that is, to gain access to political autonomy within established borders.[15]

In no multi-ethnic states are all ethnic groups exactly equal to one another. Discrimination and inequalities are inevitably associated with ethnic division and cultural, religious, social or educational differences; they act as sources of tension and mutual hostility which may lead to violence.[16] This being the case, at what point would tension and hostility leave no other alternative but violence to a frustrated and aggressed ethno-nationalist/separatist movement? This is a very difficult question to answer since the interpretation of the difficulties encountered by a particular movement would logically differ from another one because of their respective socio-historical circumstances. Furthermore, reaching a certain threshold of tolerance is insufficient, for it must "be channelled into aggressive behaviour" by the movement's leaders. While violence may erupt spontaneously, for instance during a protest, it usually needs direction and organization to be triggered.[17]

An ethno-nationalist/separatist movement would legitimize itself, Jalata explains, by relying "on the grievances of a collective memory to regain economic, political and cultural rights [and] by rejecting subordination and cultural assimilation".[18] A small stratum of that movement, when dissatisfied with the results of the political strategies pursued, may opt to resort to terrorism (providing direction and organization) in order to eliminate stratification barriers, and enhance and perpetuate their large-group identity through the acquisition of statehood or of some other form of political autonomy. Their victims are members of the dominant ethnic group, which is seen "as an occupying, opposing, colonizing or foreign force".[19] It is important to note, however, that while the movement may have a high level of legitimacy among its members, it does not necessarily follow that a terrorism group fighting for the same cause and in reaction to the same grievances

will have the same degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the movement's majority, who may reject violence for one reason or another at any given time.

Ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorist groups believe, however, that terrorism is a very effective means to get rid of the dominant ethnic group and/or achieve the specific form of political autonomy they so desire. To achieve repeated success, however, they depend on the logistical assistance of governments, organizations or individuals supporting their cause, as well as on the sympathy of their brethren. But these terrorist groups will often simultaneously strive for authority within their own ethnic group, and go as far as to eliminate any internal dissent. The study of statements by known terrorists indicates that they idealize violence "to enhance self-esteem and as a defensive response to an individual's (or group's) sense of entitlement to revenge".[20] Because they provide a sense of belonging and substitute for a missing personal identity, terrorist organizations face the "threat of success"; they must be successful enough to attract members and self-perpetuate, but not enough to no longer be needed and be in danger of dissolution.[21]

Amidst debates about the decline and future of the state, nationalism has re-emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century in a neo-nationalist form akin to regionalism or territorial identity or "niche" nationalism. Stateless nations such as Scotland, Catalonia and Quebec are included in this type because of the fluidity of the arguments they present to support their cause. Their "nationalist" governments are either on the Left or the Right, neo-liberal or social-democrat, or promoting civic or cultural/ethnic nationalism, according to the circumstances.[22] Civic nationalism, less divisive than ethnic nationalism, is usually emphasized by these nations.

McCrone writes that "the 'nation-state' remains the basic unit of political currency in the modern world,"[23] even though fewer than 10 per cent of states are culturally and ethnically homogeneous. Although the idea that nations shall have their own state is still very powerful, forming a separate state is the exception rather than the rule. The majority of the Welsh, Scots, Normans, Bretons and Basques in Europe have yet to offer wide support to nationalist parties looking at independence and sovereignty as end-goals.[24] One reason is that since colonial and neo-colonial times, ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorist groups in Europe have only been marginally successful, achieving a few tactical victories, and to various degree losing much of their original appeal. A second is the institutionalization of human, economic and political rights, norms and principles that contribute to reducing differences between, and discrimination towards, ethnic groups. Finally, a third is the fact that there are deeper divisions in society which are not based on common descent (including class, religious, gender and generational divisions, as well as a diversity of moral values, lifestyles, tastes and sensibilities).[25]

Today, religious terrorism predominates over all other forms of terrorist activity. The number of internationally active terrorist religious groups grew from 11 in 1992 to 26 (out of 56 internationally active groups) in 1995, with the most serious terrorist attacks over the past decade all sharing some kind of religious connotations. By comparison, ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorist groups (such as ETA, the IRA and the PLO)[26] do not inflict mass casualties on their opponents and are more selective in choosing their targets than their religious counterparts. The former want to keep the level of violence tolerable for the local population in order not to alienate international opinion and provoke serious governmental countermeasures.[27] The latter are much less concerned with such criteria, their objectives obviously being dissimilar. Typically, ethno-nationalist/separatist

terrorist groups are more resilient than other groups, which, on average, have a life expectancy of less than a year, with up to a 50 per cent chance of staying active as long as ten years.[28] Ethno-nationalist/separatist groups have clear goals and can rely on their brethren for support; they appeal "to a collective revolutionary tradition" to sustain the group's existence and replenish its ranks.[29] Neo-nationalist movements (such as those in Scotland, Catalonia and Quebec) continue to be quite active, but they are not for the most part using, threatening to use, nor advocating violence in any way. Millenarian, apocalyptic, anti-government, and far-right groups advocating violence or the use of terroristic means are also emerging to in effect further reduce the salience of ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorist groups.

Globalization and its economic, social and political ramifications have arguably affected the notion of the "nation-state". It is not, however, that the nation-state is becoming obsolete, but rather that its shape is being altered.[30] In addition to losing some of its traditional power attributes to international and transnational organizations[31] - counterbalanced, however, by the gaining of new areas of responsibilities - the nation-state is facing the formation of new local, including transborder, identities that counteract what they believe to be the negative effects of globalization. In such a dynamic, it is argued, "reasserting … the role of the nation is important as a stabilizing force, a counter to endless fragmentation".[32] Again, nationalism can act as a positive force, keeping together our political order, or as a negative force leading to a more fragmented and, initially, violent world. Despite changing notions of sovereignty and the multiplication of identities (mixes of ethnic, cultural, social, religious and other identities), it can fairly be said that "the state is here to stay".[33]

In light of all of these trends, we are far from seeing the disappearance of ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorist groups. Numerous breeding grounds in the former Soviet space, Asia and Africa - unequally affected by globalization and its effects and international mechanisms designed to protect national minorities and alleviate inequalities - have in fact replaced European ones. Ethnic conflicts are simmering or have recently erupted in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Angola, Cameroon, Nigeria, Comoros, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Morocco, Niger and Sudan.[34] Terrorist groups were active in a number of these conflicts.

What Can We Do?

Allowing every nation to become a state is not a sensible option, especially as history reveals there is more than one way of "being" a nation.[35] Very few national minorities, however, have ever assimilated into a larger nation. In order to manage overlapping ethnic identities, federal arrangements are often the best tools "to deprive potential nationalists of incentives or grounds for nationalist mobilization".[36] This can take the form of autonomous powers to protect culture and language and a significant presence in federal institutions to prevent abuse from the ethnic majority. These powers are usually understood to include full language rights, control over immigration, education and resource development, all issue-areas deemed essential for the long-term viability of a nation.[37] Full ethnic cultural protection, however, is hardly achievable in a globalized economy where culture is far from being exclusively ethnic-generated. Cultures, additionally, are rarely pure and often contain sub-cultures complicating the loyalties of the members. As cultural stability affects other groups in society, focusing exclusively on the protection of ethnic cultures may generate further societal tensions and

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prove, to a certain extent, to be counterproductive.[38] The positive side to a multiplicity of cultures, however, is that, as Walzer notes, "when identities are multiplied, passions are divided".[39]

Policies on multiculturalism can also produce ethnic tensions and violence, where members of different cultures simply do not have enough in common to bind them into one society.[40] Conceptually, geographical or cultural segmentation would promote ethnic coexistence and significantly reduce ethnic tensions and propensity to violence. Giddens correctly notes, however, that "few groups or nations ... can sustain a clear-cut separation from others today".[41] Accommodation is thus the key, and can only be achieved through dialogue and mutual respect, and through measures intended to eliminate discrimination and inequality of opportunities affecting national minorities and ethnic groups. Short of that, nationalist movements advocating autonomy or statehood will spring up and a few members may find it more "economical" to use terrorism to force the recognition of their "right" to self-determination. If that were to happen, the physical elimination of ethnic/nationalist leaders would be counter-productive as a solution, at least for a while. When a leader has demonstrated the ability to influence a large group's identity, it is likely that his "followers have internalized his image". To identify with another leader might be problematic; none may be available, and the reluctance may be too strong, at least initially.[42]

Unfortunately, even when the grievances of ethno-nationalist movements appear to be properly and fairly addressed, for instance through the establishment of democratic channels of participation, there is no guarantee that terrorist groups would stop their activities, ETA in Spain being a good example. This would suggest that the causes for ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorism may serve as excuses for the pathological behaviour of criminals, mad people or freedom fighters.[43] This is a line of questioning for which there is no consensus and a dire need for further research. A review of recent case studies (Balkans, Rwanda, Sri Lanka) by Fearon and Laitin[44] indicate that ethnic identity was constructed by, and ethnic violence "provoked by elites seeking to gain, maintain, or increase their hold on political power". Their intent "of constructing group identities in more antagonistic and rigid ways," Fearon and Laitin add, was realized. Given the successes engendered by ethnic violence this past decade, this research reinforces the argument that ethno-nationalist/separatist violence, including terrorism, could very well be used in future by leaders so inclined to do so. While the focus of the international community is on transnational terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, it would be inappropriate to neglect other dimensions of the terrorist problem.

ENDNOTES

[1]   Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 156.

[2]   Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (London: Victor Gallancz, 1998), 26.

[3]   Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 65-75.

[4]   I recognize that my description of this type of terrorism is rather succinct and simplistic and would like to direct the reader to works such as John L Esposito *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), John Hall (et al) *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Mark Juergensmeyer *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) for a more complete discussion.

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5   John Gearson, "The Nature of Modern Terrorism" in *Superterrorism: Policy Responses*, edited by Lawrence Freedman (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 8.

6   Derived from Ted Robert Gurr as discussed by Charles Tilly, "Violent and Non-Violent Trajectories in Contentious Politics" in *Violence and Politics: Globalization's Paradox*, edited by Kenton Worcester, Sally Avery Bermanzohn & Mark Ungar (London: Routledge, 2002), 15. The successes recorded by protagonists in recent ethnic wars (eg, Bosnia, Rwanda, etc) might also serve as encouragement to would-be terrorists.

7   David McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism: Tomorrow's Ancestors* (London: Routledge, 1998), viii.

8   For an excellent recent survey of the different schools of thought on "nation" and "nationalism" see Andrew Thompson & Ralph Fevre, "The national question: sociological reflections on nation and nationalism", *Nations and Nationalism* 7:3 (2001), 297-315.

9   Kai Nielsen, "Cultural Nationalism, Neither Ethnic Nor Civic" in *Theorizing Nationalism*, edited by Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 125.

10   Marie L Olson & Frederic S Pearson, "Policy-Making and Discrimination: Forecasting Ethnopolitical Violence", paper presented at the 41st Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (Los Angeles, CA, March 14-18, 2000), 12; Will Kymlicka, "Misunderstanding Nationalism" in *Theorizing Nationalism*, edited by Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 134.

11   McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism*, 85.

12   Irredentism, the reclaiming of a lost people and/or territories, is another form of nationalism but not as common as liberation nationalism.

13   On this particular case, see Branimir Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999) and Julie A Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 1-17.

14   Jeffrey Murer, "The Clash Within: Intrapsychically Created Enemies and Their Roles in Ethnonationalist Conflict" in *Violence and Politics: Globalization's Paradox*, edited by Kenton Worcester, Sally Avery Bermanzohn & Mark Ungar (London: Routledge, 2002), 209.

15   This paragraph is largely based on Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 21-146.

16   Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 243.

17   Kristen P Williams, "Nationalism and Ethnic Politics: An International Relations Perspective", *International Issues* 40:4 (1997), 70.

18   Asafa Jalata, "Ethno-nationalism and the global 'modernising' project", *Nations and Nationalism* 17:3 (2001), 389.

19   Volkan, *Blood Lines*, 157.

20   Volkan, *Blood Lines*, 162.

21   Volkan, *Blood Lines*, 163.

22   McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism*, 128-145.

23   McCrone, *The Sociology of Nationalism*, 169.

24   Michael Walzer, "The New Tribalism: Notes on a Difficult Problem" in *Theorizing Nationalism*, edited by Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 211.

25   Bhikhu Parekh, "The Incoherence of Nationalism" in *Theorizing Nationalism*, edited by Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 318.

26   The PIRA and the PLO have religious undertones but their goals are primarily ethno-nationalist/separatist or irredentist in nature.

27   Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 162.

28   Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 170.

29   Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 171.

30   Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 32.

31   Martin Van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), vii.

32   Giddens, *The Third Way*, 129.

33   Jerry Everard, *Virtual States: The Internet and the Boundaries of the Nation-State* (London: Routledge, 2000), 45.

34   Peter Wallensteen & Margareta Sollenberg, "Armed Conflict, 1989-98", *Journal of Peace Research* 36:5 (1999), 593-606.

35   Walzer, "The New Tribalism", 209.

36   Wayne Norman, "Theorizing Nationalism (Normatively): The First Steps" in *Theorizing Nationalism*, edited by Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 62.

37   Kymlicka, "Misunderstanding Nationalism", 140.

38   Judith Lichtenberg, "How Liberal Can Nationalism Be?" in *Theorizing Nationalism*, edited by Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 169; Brian Walker, "Modernity and Cultural Vulnerability: Should Ethnicity Be Privileged?" in *Theorizing Nationalism*, edited by Ronald Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 147.

39   Walzer, "The New Tribalism", 216.

40   Lichtenberg, "How Liberal Can Nationalism Be?" 184.

41   Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, 243.

42   Volkan, *Blood Lines*, 181.

43   Montserrat Guibernau, *Nations Without States: Political Communities in a Global Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989), 129-130.

44   James D Fearon & David D Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity", *International Organization*, Vol 54, No 4, Autumn 2000, p846.

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