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What is Victory? What is Loss? An Analysis of the War on Terrorism

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Abstract: Although first coined by then United States President Ronald Reagan in response to state-sponsored terrorism, the “War on Terrorism” has irrevocably evolved since 11 September 2001. Concerned with annihilating the terrorist threats both abroad and at home, deeper questions of the war on terrorism are unanswered. What does it mean for the state to win or lose against terrorists? Conversely, what does it mean for terrorists to win or lose against the state? More precisely, what do the outcomes of armed conflict mean and look like within the context of the war on terrorism? Current terrorism studies literature focuses on what it takes for the state to win. Yet, scholars fall short of conceptualizing the alternative. This paper is a humble attempt to engage with the gaps in current research. Analyzing broader questions of constructivism, discourse and language, this paper grapples with contemporary theories of terrorism to put forth three claims. First, terrorism is a social construct whereby discourse is instrumental. Second, perceptions of victory rely on terrorists’ capacity to deal destruction. Third, for terrorists, to lose is to be forced to cease the campaign. Although victory and loss for states is largely indefinable, both measures became distorted. The reason for this is intuitive: what makes terrorism distinct from other forms of political violence is that the tactic requires interpretation by its audience. Adopting a Foucauldian notion of discourse as the production of knowledge and power, this paper posits that the stakes of the far-reaching “War on Terrorism” were defined and intensified by the heads of state. The consequence of which was that the war became a matter of preserving liberal-democratic values rather than addressing terrorists’ motivations.
What does it mean for a state to lose to terrorism? Little to no research in the terrorism studies literature explicitly grapples with this question. Perhaps the lack of attention to the concept is a familiar consequence of limited firsthand experience and fieldwork. The objective of this paper is to consider and analyze the notions of failure and victory in “The War on Terrorism.” In other words, the attempt to understand loss and success is deliberately abstract and holds no intention to go beyond an exercise of critical thinking. Within this context, I explore the notions of state victory and terrorists’ loss. Since the subject is more restricted in a notably confined field, my underlying logic is simple: loss is diametrically opposed to success; to understand loss is to view it through the framework of success. That is, to lose is the polar opposite of to win. This paper argues first that terrorism is a social construct advanced through discourse. Second, this paper argues that since the war on terrorism is socially constructed, victory for the state is predicated upon the inability of terrorists to execute mass destruction. Just as well, for terrorists, to lose is even temporarily, to be forced to end the campaign. The conclusion suggests state loss in the war on terrorism is indefinite, but the stakes of losing the war are exaggerated.

Defining ‘terrorism’ and ‘war’

One of the many hallmarks of terrorism studies is the issue of defining terrorism and defining who or what can be or commit terrorism. The claims and justifications for the sake of labeling and not labeling are diverse and contested. For instance, after accepting the United States State Department’s definition of terrorism in his article, Robert Pape says that accepting a broad definition of terrorism that includes a national government “would distract from what policy makers would most like to know: “how to combat the threat posed by subnational groups to state security.”” On the other end of the spectrum, in her article, Ruth Blakeley suggests in support for the view that states can commit terrorism that “critically oriented scholars need to reclaim the term ‘terrorism’ and use it as an analytical tool rather than in the service of elite power.” This paper isn’t concerned with engaging in or adding a new dimension into this debate. Instead this paper adopts the definition of terrorism provided by the United States Department of Defense: “the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological objectives.”

Equally as important as establishing a definition of terrorism, I define war as the declaration of, or state of, armed conflict among states and/or subnational groups. Explicit mention of armed conflict goes hand in hand with the threat of violence in that the declaration entails premeditation. In the following section, I briefly contextualize the war on terrorism and argue terrorism itself can best be understood as a social construct.
Constructivism and terrorism

Then United States President, Ronald Reagan, coined the war on terror in reference to conflicts of state-sponsored terrorism. However, the notion of a war on terrorism wasn’t popularized until former President George W. Bush’s speech before a joint session of congress on 20 September 2001. The war on terrorism is an ongoing, international military campaign that was declared in response to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. The objectives of the war can best be described as delivering wholesale destruction to terrorist organizations; eliminating the circumstances whereby terrorists can reemerge, and protecting the citizens and the interests of the US and her allies. Yet, the deeper question the objectives beg is who or what is the war against? To be more precise, is the war on terrorism centered on al-Qaeda and its affiliates or the tactic itself? The perception of exactly who or what the US and her allies are in war against receives different interpretations. For instance, in May 2013, President Barack Obama stated that “The ‘Global War on Terror’ is over, the military and intelligence agencies will not wage war against a tactic but will instead focus on a specific group of networks determined to destroy the US.” Contrasting, scholars such as Michel Chossudovksy, outright claim that the focus of the war is on Islamic terrorists: “Osama bin Laden, supported by his various henchmen, constitutes America’s post-Cold war bogeyman, who ‘threatens Western democracy.’ The alleged threat of ‘Islamic terrorists,’ permeates the entire US national security doctrine.” The point here is that the war on terrorism “does not separate a war against terrorists from a war against terrorism, as a social phenomenon.”

The lack of a distinction made between a war on tactics as opposed to a war on a diffuse set of individuals and networks has two interrelated impacts: it allows more flexibility of the war on terrorism’s social construction and shapes the perception of what victory and defeat looks like in the war on terrorism for both the US and her allies and the terrorists.

Terrorism is a social construct. That is, the understanding of terrorism is built “through social processes in which meanings are negotiated, consensus formed, and contestation is possible.” The phenomenon “is not a ‘given’ in the real world; instead it is an interpretation of events and their presumed causes.” This means that communicating about terrorism, regardless of the intentionality behind the interpretations, becomes “a medium by which the negotiation and construction of meaning takes place.” Moreover, in explaining the evolution of the word, terrorist’s meaning—from a positive connotation during the French Revolution and struggles for emancipation throughout the twentieth century, to its status as a pejorative term today—Bruce Hoffman demonstrates that the current, modern understanding of terrorism is subjective and conditional. If terrorism is socially constructed, how does the development of meaning take place? The understanding of terrorism is built through discourse. Terrorism’s meaning is fundamentally determined by the communication that takes place among its targets.

Rainer Hülssse and Alexander Spencer speak to this point in critiquing terrorism studies’ preoccupation with the terrorist actor: “one scholar reproduces the unverified views of another and thus contributes to the circulation... of interpretations of how others
have interpreted al Qaeda members’ self-interpretation.”[xvii] Which “overlooks that self-representations only become relevant as they become the object of interpretations in the Western discourse.”[xviii] For Michel Foucault, discourse was “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a particular topic at a particular historical moment.”[xix] Discourse can work to define and build the perceptions of objects and events; it “is about the production of knowledge through language.”[xix] Since terrorism is used to create certain effects on its targets, whereby “terrorizing” can take place, then terrorism is reliant on the inter-subjectivities of its audience— their sensibilities towards and analyses of the events. For all these reasons, the Western discourse on the war on terrorism is instrumental in the social construction of terrorism itself. That is to say that, in a Foucauldian sense, whether or not the discourse is true, the power in its production of knowledge makes it so the discourse becomes true.[xx] In other words, despite the true identity of terrorists, interpretation and discourse make it so “if we think they are and act on that ‘knowledge,’ they in effect become terrorists because we treat them as such.”[xxi]

To develop this argument further, I briefly evaluate the impact of race in violent crime. Specifically, I look to the possibility that the impact of race makes it so that events, that are terrorism by definition (even in its loose sense), are treated differently. To be precise, I compare the treatment of the 2015 shooting in Charleston, NC as opposed to the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, CA of the same year. The purpose behind this is to demonstrate how perpetrators have limited agency in defining their actions. Instead, the subsequent discourse influences the meaning of the action.

The former was a racially motivated shooting at a black church during an evening bible study on 10 June 2015. The latter was an attack fueled by extreme Islamic ideology at a social services center on 2 December 2015. For the former, the perpetrator Dylann Roof shot and killed nine churchgoers in a confessedly premeditated act intended for the political purpose of striking fear and creating a race war.[xviii] Although the shooting was terrorism by definition, according to the Department of Justice, the act was investigated as a hate crime.[xvi] For the latter, the perpetrators Syed Farook and Tashfeen Malik left fourteen killed and twenty-two injured in their raid of the social services center. The act was reportedly inspired by foreign terrorist groups and, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), investigated as terrorism.

Roof, a Caucasian male, since his incarceration, has been defended by the media as “being troubled” and “[showing] all the signs of severe and worsening mental illness” in reference to his struggle staying in school and subsequent drug use, whereas the U.S.-born Muslim, Farook, and his Pakistani wife, Malik, were killed hours later.[xv] They reportedly “[appeared] to exemplify this brand of ‘homegrown’ or ‘self-radicalized’ terrorist.”[xvi] The difference in the language used to describe both violent events presents how agency can be limited in discourse. Despite the confessed aims by Roof, which would correctly label him a terrorist, his intentions and agency in his actions were restricted through the eventual discourse that followed. His identity was constructed as a ‘troubled’ hate crime-committer. In contrast, the personal characteristics of Farook and
Halik, more than likely influenced their immediate deaths and the avoidance of labeling either or both perpetrators mentally ill. As a result, although their self-reported objectives are unknown, their personal characteristics afforded them no sympathy or attempt of understanding. In other words, the discourse in tandem with their appearance limited their ability to construct an identity and meaning to their actions. Both the difference of discourse in the events of Charleston and San Bernardino, accompanied by much of the recent literature on media bias in white and minority crime are evidence of race’s impact in interpretations.\textsuperscript{xxii}

Another strong example of discourse’s instrumentality in social construction is the rhetoric of former President Bush. As I will show, he rendered a political struggle a matter of “good” versus “evil”. At his speech before a joint session of congress, Bush said that (emphasis added):

On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars - but for the past 136 years, they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war - but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks - but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day - and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

Bush put forth three ideas in his speech that constructed for his audience, an identity to al Qaeda, the appropriate response to the event, and the meaning of the attack itself.

Recognize that Bush defines the perpetrators as ‘enemies of freedom.’ The impact here lies in the implication: terrorists pose a harm beyond American citizens, they are an affront to our liberal-democratic principles. In saying then, that the terrorists are enemies of freedom, Bush expands their identity. He constructs their selfhood by placing them in intimate opposition to the value of freedom itself. In this sense, terrorists are dehumanized. They become the ‘other’ to more than the American people; they are otherized to any person that values freedom. Bush’s declaration that ‘freedom itself is under attack’ extends the conflict. Again, by way of implication, his speech raises the stakes and propagates fear. ‘Under attack’ implies a continuation of assaults on the value of freedom. In defining the terrorist attacks as freedom being under attack, Bush extends the war’s temporality. He implies that more assaults to freedom can and will happen. This illustrates a Manichean world where the US and her allies are the sole protectors of the “right” values. His discourse was instrumental in advancing the social construction of terrorism in building the identity of the terrorists as “evil-doers” who are personally in opposition to freedom.\textsuperscript{xiv} Next, in saying that the terrorists executed ‘an act of war,’ Bush maintains the construction of the terrorists’ identity, and preconditions the U.S. to retaliate. He renders war a morally legitimate response in putting the terrorists in conflict with freedom. For the US, a war response becomes a responsibility, because the value of
freedom is a cause worthy of uniting citizens for the sake of the greater good. The point here is that Bush served a crucial role in shaping the construction of the terrorists’ identity and overstated the stakes of loss.

For Bush, the meaning of the war against terrorism is not to simply bear extensive collateral damage, or to concede to territorial losses—it means a spiritual struggle. US discourse on terrorism usually “[e]vokes images of menacing nomadic armies attempting to conquer ‘Christian Europe’ and ‘good’ versus ‘evil,’ a formulation which is [d]eeply embedded in American rhetorical traditions and religious life,” Bush’s speech was no different. Although it has been argued that political discourse that makes appeals to religion is for the sake of garnering legitimacy and support, this in this respect, Bush upped the ante of the war. That is, in framing this struggle, he built a dichotomy. This dichotomy provides insight into the meaning of the war on terrorism. In his words, “freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.” In this sentence Bush is implying that God is on the Western states’ side in the war on terrorism. Because for him, the mission to oppose terrorism at every turn was “a mission from God.” If the political struggle against terrorism is a spiritual struggle, then the meaning of the war against terrorism is to triumph over the values of evil. I explain this through relating the war on terrorism to George Lakoff’s concept of war’s “fairy tale asymmetry.”

For Lakoff, in order for a war to be justified, it is necessary to distribute the archetypal roles of hero, villain and victim. In his view, this narrative constructs an air of legitimacy throughout the conduct of war that “[f]unctions to justify... [to a higher extent] all the extensive powers reserved for wartime.” The narrative’s hero is always honorable and selflessly makes sacrifices. Whereas the villain is inherently evil and displays the willingness to commit violence against the innocent. In the US’ narrative on terrorism, as has been shown, the “hero” (the US and her allies) represents all that is good is against the “villain” (terrorists) who represents all that is bad. The point here is that, through discourse, Bush overstated the meaning of the war on terrorism, which enabled it to take on values and a struggle it didn’t represent. In other words, my analysis of Bush’s discourse on the war on terrorism demonstrates that “defining the threats facing a society is never an objective process, but is rather a highly charged and politicized process of ‘reality’ construction through the deployment of language.”

Here, I discuss what victory looks like for the US and what loss looks like for terrorists. I do not discuss what victory for terrorists looks like or what loss for the state can be defined as, because as stated in the introduction, neither are the chief concern of this paper. For simplicity, I adopt the definition of victory as the realization of notions or aims defined by the actors engaged in the conflict. For terrorists, to lose is, even temporarily, a forced end to the terrorist campaign. The justification for this definition is provided after I explain the notions of US victory.

**Perceptions of victory**
On 23 May 2013 at the National Defense University, President Obama, in the conclusion of his speech, said that “Our victory against terrorism won’t be measured in a surrender ceremony at a battleship, or a statue being pulled to the ground,” he continued, “Victory will be measured in parents taking their kids to school; immigrants coming to our shores; fans taking in a ballgame; a veteran starting a business; a bustling city street; a citizen shouting her concerns at a President.” For Obama, victory against the war on terrorism is the return to normalcy. Public comfort, following the mass panic that the notion of terrorism brings, then, becomes a metric of success.

The significance of feeling secure reemerges throughout speeches from the leaders of the federal government to terrorism studies scholars. Even in the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, the conception and the importance of returning to normal fueled social activity: “It was the most typical of Parisian scenes—the sharing of drinks among friends. But after the worst terrorist assault on France in recent history, it was also meant to be an act of defiance, a modern-day symbol of “la résistance.” As one of the French citizens explained, “I can’t say that we’re not afraid... But compared with the terror and repression that the Islamic State represents... We are as free as the air. Their acts make us even more determined to show that we will never give up our freedoms.” Similarly, Cronin explains that “‘winning’ is the glaring need to build psychological resilience among the American people, so that they are less subject to being manipulated by threats of attacks.” Furthermore, “Americans must stop living on adrenaline and build a sustainable future by ending this war and developing some concept of what normality means.” In these comparable interpretations of victory, success means supplanting mass hysteria with the feeling of sanctuary. However, the public’s comfort is not borne simply through time alone. Instead, the sentiment, and thus, the perception of victory, is earned through action.

As Janis Angstrom points out, under the presidency of George W. Bush, the measurements of success in the war on terrorism were predicated upon military success. That is, the conceptions of victory were based in the gradual destruction of the adversary’s military and will. As she notes, in the war on terrorism, Bush’s metrics were “casualty figures, control of territory, frequency of terrorist attacks, spread of weapons of mass destruction, and spread of democracy.” In a Clausewitzian sense then, the Bush administration’s notion of victory was comprised of the destruction of military power, “reduced to such a state as not to be able to prosecute the War,” and the dissolution of the enemy’s morale. Even by these measurements, victory in the war against terrorism is a matter of public sentiment, albeit almost exclusively through military force within this context. That is not to say that military action is the answer. Rather that is to say that tactics that mitigate the terrorist threat make the perception of victory conceivable.

This is because the means to the end of the terrorist threat that result in less attacks lead to an increased feeling of public safety and security. As mentioned throughout this paper thus far, terrorism “is employed to produce certain effects on a specific set of people in order to attain an objective or policy.” That said, when terrorists begin to fail, victory
appears upon the horizon. However, these notions prove problematic. Public comfort is an indicator of the state’s success. After all, indifference is diametrically opposed to fear. Yet, the fact that the sentiment must be realized through the proof of terrorist capabilities deterioration implies contingency. To be more precise, the perception of victory is less concerned with the state’s capacity to preserve freedom, and more concerned with terrorists’ lessening capacity for destruction. To this end I define terrorists’ loss in the war on terrorism as, even temporarily, the forced end to their campaign. This is because the measurements of US victory in the war on terrorism are determined by returning to a state of normalcy and terrorists’ capacity for further destruction. Both of which are a direct result of the lessening of terrorists’ ability to perform another attack. Just as well, for terrorists, victory can only be more or less realized. Because the current terrorists’ goals are untenable, terrorists cannot experience complete victory and are more likely to become destabilized.

Modern, religious terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and its affiliates establish ultimate goals that are impossible to attain. For example, in Inside Terrorism, Bruce Hoffman quotes a Shi’a theologian, Aaytollah Baqer al-Sadr, “We have two choices: either to accept [the world others shaped] with submission, which means letting Islam die, or to destroy it, so that we can construct the world Islam Requires.” Just as well, the improbable objectives of the leader of the cult, Aum Shinrikyo, are of use here: “Ashara believed that he had been ordained an… ancient ‘light god,’ and given the divine task of establishing the ‘Kingdom of Shambhala’- a utopian community populated only by those who had achieved psychic powers.” This is not to disparage any religion. Rather it is to say that objectives such as destroying and reconstructing the world or establishing a utopian community exclusive to psychics, are very unlikely. The goals are far-reaching and fanciful at best and bizarre and impossible at worst. However, this is the case for solely ideology-driven terrorist groups. Compared to ethno-nationalist terrorists who sought after self-determination, religious terrorist groups in general, and al Qaeda in particular seem preconditioned to never experience complete victory. For nationalist groups the aims were plausible and many times successful: “subsequently all anticolonial terrorists sought to interest the UN in their struggles. The new states admitted to the UN were nearly always former colonial territories, and they gave the anticolonial sentiment in that body more structure, focus, and opportunities.” For religious terrorist groups though, within their pursuit of grandiose aims, they become more susceptible to destabilization.

To connect the perceptions of victory for the US to the impossible goals of religious terrorists, the latter inadvertently creates a pathway to success for the former. As I will present shortly, destabilization is an ever-present risk for terrorists. The implication of which is that enough destabilization results in the forced end of a terrorist campaign. If a condition of victory for the US is terrorists’ incapacity for destruction and thus, the return to normalcy for US citizens, then the forced end of a terrorist campaign is victory. In this sense then, the campaign’s end means loss for the terrorists. In sum, the goals of terrorists
create the circumstances for terrorists to lose in the war on terror. The question here is, what can cause destabilization?

Goal changing can precipitate the defeat of terrorist groups in the war on terrorism. This is because, although changing goals is a common practice, it threatens the popular support of terrorist groups. The changes can represent emerging needs or perhaps newly recognized intermediary goals needed to pursue the ultimate objective. In either case, the fact that religious terrorist groups’ aims are implausible does not make them invulnerable to shifting goals. In fact, religious terrorists are more vulnerable to failing through goal changing since the group is more akin to a movement than an organization.

On one hand, a movement is groups of people working together to pursue their shared social, political, economic goals. Social movements vary, but have the tendency of being large, informal pseudo-structures. On the other hand, a terrorist organization is an organized group of people who each hold particular goals relevant to a campaign, which is a series of operations intended to achieve a goal. As detailed by Cronin in “How Al Qaeda Ends,” the organization is comprised of a core group, traditional groups that are formally and informally aligned, localized factions and militants who are not directly associated with al Qaeda, but are purported to be. Another component of the terrorist organization, the network, is a paragon of the relationship between political violence and technology. The impact of al Qaeda being a movement in terms of goal changing is that cyberspace affords ample opportunities for recruitment, fundraising, and coordination of attacks that effectively reconstructed terrorism. With improved capabilities, members of terrorist groups are now spread throughout the globe carrying out attacks and providing financial support for the sake of the movement. According to Cronin “al Qaeda is uniquely able to use existing social networks to mobilize global supporters and transform sympathizers into violent activists.” Since al Qaeda and its affiliates operate within a “lack of central authority and rule-guided interaction implies that decision-making and coordination in networks tend to be based on consensus and mutual adjustment rather than administrative fiat,” goal changing can easily result in losing connection with its constituency. Unpopularity of objectives can cause supporters to drift from the cause, unpopularity of actions too can lessen terrorists’ support base. Excessively violent acts can be incompatible with the sensibilities of supporters resulting in public revulsion. This is because “a terrorist group may choose a target that a wide range of its constituents considers illegitimate, undercutting the group and transferring popular support to the government’s response.” The point here is that, in the war on terrorism, in a sense, terrorists can be self-defeating. The implication is that the US and her allies have a greater probability of being successful in the war.

Conclusion

In this paper, I first argued that terrorism is a social construction advanced through discourse. To substantiate my argument, I discussed the nature of terrorism, its purposes and its subsequent treatment. For its treatment, I demonstrated the ways in which discourse
fuels the social construction of terrorism through first comparing and contrasting the Charleston shooting and the terrorist attack in San Bernardino. Second, I argued that Bush’s speech on 20 September 2001 too, provided meaning, albeit hyperbolic, for the violent actions. My second argument focused on the perceptions of victory and loss in the war on terrorism. I linked measurements of US success in the war on terrorism to the capabilities of terrorist actors. In doing so, I argued that the US’ perception of victory is inextricably tied to the longevity of terrorist campaigns. Third, I argued that the evolution of terrorists, their structures and their aims, make it so that modern, religious terrorists cannot experience complete success. Overall, however, the conceptions of victory and failure in the war on terrorism are distinct, yet familiar. War against terrorists is naturally different. Even in the outcomes of this analysis, the fact of the matter is that victory and loss are not written out and not agreed upon: “The United States cannot win a war with al Qaeda the usual means by which wars end—negotiated conclusions—are not available in this case.”

Instead, winning and losing in the war on terrorism are a matter of perceptions, interpretations, and sentiment.

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ii The literature is comprised primarily of orthodox and critical terrorism studies. The key point of divergence between the two is the belief that states can practice terrorist tactics. The former posits that terrorism, despite the similarity among the actions is conducted by subnational groups. Whereas the latter holds that offenses such as bombings and war crimes are terrorism within themselves. Therefore, critical terrorism studies scholars insist that states can and have practiced terrorist tactics.


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