Conceptualising International Terrorism

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**Theme:** International terrorism is not exactly the same thing as transnational terrorism. Neither should international terrorism be confused with Islamist terrorism, even though these terms refer to phenomena that at present largely overlap. This paper explains why this is so, proposes two basic criteria for an analytical definition of international terrorism and applies these definitions to the current reality of globalised violence.

**Summary:** International terrorism is, first of all, committed to deliberately affect the structure and distribution of power in whole areas of the world and even at the level of global society itself. Second, the individuals and groups who carry it out have extended their activities to a significant number of countries and geo-political regions, in accordance with the scope of their declared aims. International terrorism is similar in many ways to other forms of terrorism and is, by definition, transnational. Not all transnational terrorism, however, can be considered international. Al-Qaeda, its local and regional affiliates, as well as many self-generated cells aligned with its structure, constitute international terrorism today. This can be deduced both from its declared ultimate goal –to re-establish a caliphate– and from the way it has spread to numerous countries both in the Muslim world and beyond. However, there are Islamist groups and organizations that systematically carry out attacks but are not part of the international terrorist networks linked to the global neo-Salafist Jihad.

**Analysis:** Reference is often made to international terrorism in terms that are excessively vague or imprecise, making it difficult to properly appreciate its scope and size or to carry out detailed studies of its trends over time. The problem of how to define this phenomenon may also affect how it is perceived by the media, public opinion, academics and political elites in our societies. It may even affect decision-making related to specific governmental measures aimed at dealing with the nature and scope of this violence, as well as the widely-shared understanding on which effective governmental cooperation needs to be based in order to combat the risks and threats inherent to this phenomenon. It is therefore advisable to adopt more precise, limited criteria to define international terrorism in order, as much as possible, to avoid some of the usual misunderstandings when defining the concept and analysing it. Such inaccuracies have limited the validity of numerous reports, chronologies and databases used to develop a reliable understanding of international terrorism.

It is clear that international terrorism is largely analogous to other types of terrorism. A violent act can be considered terrorism if its psychological impact on a society or a segment of a society, in terms of anxiety or fear, is far greater than its material

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consequences, that is, the intentional physical harm to persons and property. Those who
instigate or carry out terrorism do so in order to affect the attitudes and behaviour of
leaders and citizens. They generally act systematically and unpredictably, choosing targets
that have some symbolic relevance in their cultural contexts or institutional frameworks –
targets often chosen on the basis of opportunism— and using their harm or destruction to
transmit messages and give credibility to their threats. This makes terrorism an extreme
form of propaganda and also of social control.1 It can be used by highly varied actors with
very different goals, including political ones. By characterizing it as international, we
make certain assumptions about its goals and dimensions. However, there is very little
analytical precision regarding what is and what is not international terrorism.

For example, transnational terrorism and international terrorism are often confused
when, in fact, the former includes the latter, but not vice-versa2. Transnational terrorism
in one way or another crosses state borders, essentially because those who perpetrate it
maintain organizational structures or carry out violent activities in more than one
country, generally including territories over which the authorities to whom their
demands are directed have no jurisdiction. This means acts of violence that involve
more than one country and frequently terrorists and victims of two or more
nationalities. Today, it would be very difficult to name an organization systematically
involved in the practice of terrorism that has not transnationalised its activities to a
greater or lesser degree, whether in order to mobilize the necessary resources to
maintain its clandestine structure or to plan and carry out attacks. Furthermore, most of
the terrorist attacks registered around the world in recent years are linked to political
objectives that directly affect only two, or very few more, states and, though they have
transnational connotations, they are not truly international in scope. They are
expressions of transnationalised terrorism but not of international terrorism.

What then, does international terrorism consist of? At first sight, there are essentially
two criteria that could define this phenomenon: one related to the goals pursued by
terrorism and the other related to the effective extent of the organizational structures or
networks that perpetrate this violence. International terrorism is, first of all, practiced
with the deliberate intention of affecting the structure and distribution of power in entire
areas of the world and even at the level of global society itself. Second, the individuals
and groups who carry it out have extended their activities to a significant number of
countries and geo-political regions, in accordance with their declared aims. In the
absence of this latter premise, the former premise would be necessary to define this
phenomenon but it would not be sufficient. There could be, for example, groups
involved in systematic and sustained acts of terrorism, whose declared goals affect the
global socio-political order, but whose clandestine structure is limited to a small
territorial area with scant external links, making it inappropriate to consider them
international terrorists.

However, the specific configuration of international terrorism can vary significantly
over time, as recent history has shown. It is imaginable, for example, that countries with
shared geo-strategic interests could sponsor or make use of already existing
transnational terrorist organizations, giving an international profile to the violence of
these groups. This was the case in the 1970s and 80s with a large part of the
international terrorism sponsored one way or another by leaders of the former
Communist block to destabilize Western Europe in general and, more specifically, certain countries on its southern confines. In the mid-1980s, there was even a formal agreement among several terrorist organizations on the extreme left (all of autochthonous origin, but inter-related and aligned with the former Communist bloc) to plan and execute a series of attacks that would have an impact on installations of the Atlantic Alliance in their respective Western European countries and on the social perception of this collective defence system put in place during the Cold War.

In any case, the long-term strategy of any form of international terrorism is entirely compatible with more limited, shorter-term objectives, both for individual actors involved in the violence and for all these actors taken as a whole. Objectives such as, for instance, causing a change of regime or political alignments in a given country, or even fighting for the creation or disappearance of a state, can be considered an element of the designs of international terrorism as long as they are also part of a much more ambitious political project. However, when the impact on a specific region (or an even wider area) of a terrorist campaign developed with this type of goals in mind are not sought by those who perpetrate them or are relegated to the background by other more limited objectives, then we are not really speaking about international terrorism. For example, the attacks that have been made against Israeli targets for several decades by radical Palestinian organizations could best be considered manifestations of nationalist terrorism with state-forming goals –certainly with a highly transnational character– but not as international terrorism per se.

This conceptualization of international terrorism differs from the definitions currently in use in academic circles and legal documents. Legal codes and international treaties relatively seldom refer specifically to international terrorism and refer instead to terrorism generically, regardless of where it occurs, as is advisable in texts of these kinds. However, when they do so, they tend to use descriptions that confuse it with transnational terrorism in the broad sense or, from a perspective that does not transcend state jurisdiction, simply with foreign terrorism. Furthermore, academic definitions, which require even more rigorous conceptualization, often fail to provide a specific analysis of international terrorism or else tend to define it as simply an externalization of terrorism in general, whether on the part of state or non-state actors, beyond the confines of a specific country. Although it can be argued that the internal and external facets of terrorism should not be separated in the empirical investigation of the phenomenon, the drawback of this approach is that it does not allow a distinction to be made between transnationalised terrorism and international terrorism. This means that chronologies and databases on terrorism can easily commit a double error: on the one hand, listing incidents as international terrorism when they are merely transnational in scope and, on the other hand, presenting as episodes of domestic terrorism certain internal or domestic acts by groups or organizations whose activities are broadly transnationalised or whose goals and links involve international terrorism.

But when we speak of international terrorism today, who in fact are we referring to? Since the nineties, numerous attacks in many places around the world correspond to an Islamist international terrorism as practiced by different armed groups at the regional or local level, who either originate in al-Qaeda or take this organization as their point of reference. This terrorist structure was established in the late eighties in Afghanistan and
was consolidated in the first half of the nineties in Sudan, before returning to central Asia, this time in connivance with the overthrown Taliban regime. In February 1998, it sponsored the founding of the so-called ‘World Front for the Holy War against Jews and Crusaders’, which was the precursor to the international terrorism that broke out at the turn of the new century. Al-Qaeda and its various associated groups around the world, as well as numerous self-established local groups, today make up the complex multinational and multi-ethnic fabric of international terrorism. Among the best-known incidents that can be attributed since then to the organizations and groups that practice it are those carried out in August 1998 in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, in September 2001 in New York and Washington, in October 2002 in Bali, in May 2003 in Casablanca and Riyadh and in March 2004 in Madrid. However, despite their decidedly anti-Western rhetoric, international terrorism today has ended up having the greatest impact on other societies and local populations in Arab and Muslim countries.

The fact that international terrorism is now Islamist in its orientation is a distinguishing feature of what is known as the fourth wave of modern insurgent terrorism, although for more than ten years now there exists a new kind of Islamist terrorism, distinct from other immediately preceding versions of this type of violence also practiced by Muslim fundamentalists: Shiites sponsored by Iranian theocrats and Syrian government agencies, among others. Both the individuals and groups involved in the complex and widespread network of international terrorism today are characterized by a specific, shared vision of Islamic doctrine. Specifically, they share attitudes and beliefs belonging to neo-Salafism, that is, an extreme, violent Salafism that differs from other equally puritanical but not aggressive versions of the same philosophy. The neo-Salafist doctrine is based on an inflexible and timeless reading of the Koran and the Hadis, its followers are socialized in an intense hatred of those they consider to be infidels and, among other possible interpretations, they accept the most clearly bellicose definition of Jihad, both in terms of defence and aggression. This is the basis of Jihadism.

However, not all Islamist-inspired groups and organizations that have been systematically carrying out acts of terrorism are part of today’s international terrorism networks. For example, Hamas, whose wide range of activities is broadly transnationalised, has repeatedly attacked Israeli interests and citizens through the so-called Izz al Din al Qassam Brigades, as a way to work towards the founding of an independent Palestinian state, like other terrorist organizations, both secular and religious in inspiration, based in the occupied territories. However, as far as is known to date, no formal links or strategic harmony have been established between these terrorist groups and al-Qaeda or with any of its affiliated bodies. The same is true of various armed Muslim movements operating in conflict-ridden areas of the periphery of the Islamic world, such as the northern Caucasus or southern Thailand. Groups in both these areas carry out violent campaigns with essentially separatist goals and, in principle, have nothing to do with neo-Salafism and the pan-Islamic aims underlying the networks of today’s international terrorism. However, these groups may end up being absorbed into the larger movement. In fact, in both areas, recent trends indicate that things are moving precisely in that direction.
What makes the terrorism practiced by the neo-Salafist Islamists aligned with al-Qaeda truly international in scope is its ultimate goal, as stated by the founders and followers of the movement: none other than to mobilize the community they imagine as the ‘Muslim nation’ to unify politically under Islam. In the terms used by the those involved in the Jihadist networks, this means re-establishing a caliphate that would extend from the extreme west of the Mediterranean basin to south-east Asia and that would help their religious creed dominate the world. This goal transcends, but coexists with, the respective territorial goals of local and regional groups. Also, regarding the second of the above mentioned criteria for defining international terrorism, it is estimated that the violent neo-Salafist Jihad movement includes more than twenty associated groups and organizations at the local or regional level, which are effectively present in no less than fifty or sixty countries, both within and beyond the Muslim world. In 2004 alone, nearly two hundred attacks were committed in thirteen countries and five geo-political regions by seventeen groups and organizations linked to this network. 11 International terrorism is, therefore, spreading in accordance with its strategy and its declared ultimate goals.

**Conclusion:** International terrorism is, first of all, practiced with the deliberate intention of affecting the structure and distribution of power in entire areas of the world and even at the level of global society itself. Second, the individuals and groups who carry it out have extended their activities to a significant number of countries and geopolitical regions, in accordance with their declared aims. In any case, the long-term strategy of international terrorism is entirely compatible with more limited, shorter-term objectives, both for individual actors involved in the violence and for all these actors taken as a whole. This means, of course, that international terrorism is largely analogous to other specific types of terrorism. However, not all transnational terrorism is international terrorism, even though all international terrorism is, by definition, transnational terrorism. Furthermore, the specific configuration of international terrorism can vary significantly from one period to another.

In our times, al-Qaeda and its twenty to thirty affiliated local and regional organizations, as well as numerous self-established cells, constitute the fabric of a form of international terrorism that has spread to dozens of countries, both in the Muslim world and in the heart of western societies. The pan-Islamic goals of today’s international terrorism, the spread of the networks that support the mobilizations associated with this violence, the fact that the attacks committed by groups and organizations belonging to these networks have occurred in very different parts of the world, and the capacity demonstrated by their founders to plan and successfully execute acts of mega-terrorism lead to the conclusion that today’s international terrorism is also global terrorism. 11 It is also interesting to observe that there has been widespread consensus among practically all governments around the world that this should in fact be considered international terrorism and, as such, a common threat to national security. Such harmonious agreement is unthinkable when it comes to other expressions of contemporary terrorism. Furthermore, despite the fact that the individuals and groups involved in international terrorism today share an Islamist vision, not all Islamist groups and organizations that systematically commit acts of terrorism are part of the networks of the global neo-Salafist Jihad. That is, Islamist terrorism is not exactly the same as international terrorism, so that the appropriate use of the latter term, in reference to
violence that meets the criteria set out in this article, has more to do with conceptual precision than with political correctness.


2 A preliminary essay on the distinction between transnational terrorism and international terrorism can be found in Fernando Reinares (1998), *Terrorismo y antiterrorismo*, Ediciones Paidós, Barcelona, especially p. 175-193.


4 This is, for example, the case of the *Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act* (known as the USA PATRIOT Act), passed by the US Congress little more than a month after September 11, 2001. This law amended the United States Code, article 18 of which was made to distinguish between domestic terrorism, occurring mainly within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States, and international terrorism, occurring outside US borders or going beyond national borders.

5 For example, this is the meaning attributed to the notion of international terrorism in Alex P. Schmid (2004), ‘Frameworks for Conceptualizing Terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 197-221.


7 In this regard, see the data organized and analysed by Fernando Reinares in ‘El terrorismo internacional’, p. 47-72 in Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos and Elcano Royal Institute (2005), *Panorama Estratégico 2004/2005*, Ministry of Defence, Madrid.


11 A brief essay on the interpretation of this phenomenon is provided by Fernando Reinares (2003), *Terrorismo global*, Taurus, Madrid.