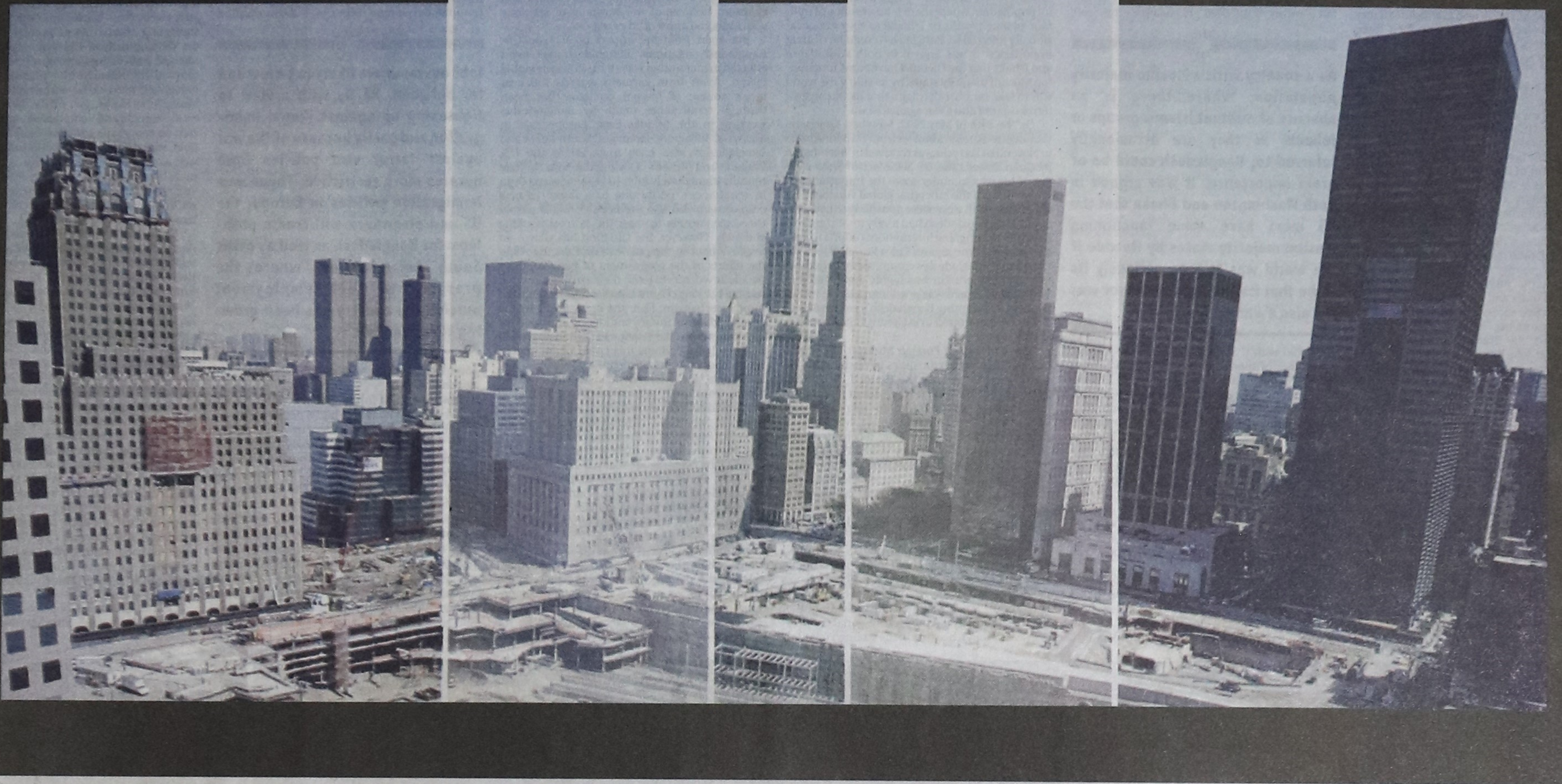


SEPTEMBER ELEVEN SPECIAL

THE EVENT THAT CHANGED THE WORLD



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Understanding modern terrorism

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EVER since that fateful September day, when terrorists struck New York's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in Washington D.C., terrorism has become the buzzword in international relations jargon. Indeed 9/11 marks the most important date in the long and bloody history of terrorism. No other terrorist attack used passenger planes as bombs, produced such staggering casualty figures, created such enormous universal outrage, and galvanized such a wide response, one that could reshape the character on international relations. But even such ghastly act of terror should be studied in the context of the history of terrorism—a history that demonstrates how deeply implanted terrorism has become in modern culture especially during the last two centuries, explains the various forms of terrorism seen today and suggests what the future may hold for us.

Hundreds of definitions of terrorism are offered in the literature. Some focus on the perpetrators, others on their purposes, and still others on their techniques. But only two characteristics are critical for distinguishing terrorism from other forms of violence. First, terrorism is aimed noncombatants. This is what makes it different from fighting in war. Second, terrorists use violence for a dramatic purpose: usually to install fear in the targeted population. This deliberate evocation of dread is what sets terrorism apart from simple murder or assault. While it is easy to identify terrorism distinguishing characteristics the trouble lies with the concept itself. Indeed definitions of terrorism have changed with the times and the political environment.

The word *terrorism* originated in revolutionary France and in contrast to its contemporary usage, the word had a positive connotation. The system or *regime de la terreur* of 1793-94 from which the English word came—was adopted as a means to establish order during the transient anarchical period of turmoil that followed the uprisings of 1789, as it has followed in the wake of many other revolutions. As Robespierre proclaimed, "virtue or the terror."

The concept of terrorism has been evolving since those heady days. Nearly a century after the French Revolution, the first terror rebel movement, Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will) emerged in 1879, and its successors haunted Russia for nearly two decades. Seeking a radical transformation of society, the group's members understood terrorism as a temporary necessity to "raise the consciousness of the masses" and selected victims for symbolic reasons—i.e. for the emotional and the political responses their deaths would have. Their objectives were never achieved, but their influence endured to generate a "culture of terror" for successors to inherit and improve.

Since the 1880s, four successive, overlapping, major waves of terror have washed over the world, each with its own special character, purposes and tactics. The first three lasted approximately a generation each; and the fourth which began from the late 1970s is still in process.

The first wave had the late nineteenth century Europe rocked by a series of sensational assassinations. Anarchists and social revolutionaries attacked kings, queens, members of the aristocracy, and government officials, creating a sense of high anxiety among the ruling class. The 1890s came to be known as the decade of the bomb and

saw heads of state being murdered at the rate of nearly one a year. President Carnot of France was assassinated in 1894, the empress of Austria in 1898, the king of Italy in 1900, and the president of the United States in 1901. Dynamite was the weapon of choice, and the bomb the terrorists threw distinguished him from the ordinary criminal because it usually also killed the attacker. The first wave saw the Armenian terrorist movement emerging and the Balkans exploding with groups such as Young Bosnia and the Serbian Black Hand. Terrorist violence in Russia continued unabated, setting the stage for the emergence of the police state. Looking invincible at one stage, the first

same account were described alternatively as terrorists, guerrillas, and soldiers. The trend continues to this day.

The Vietnam War precipitated the third wave as the success of the Vietcong terror against the American Goliath armed with modern technology kindled hopes that the Western heartland was vulnerable too. A revolutionary fervor emerged compared to that in the first wave. Many, such as the American Weather Underground, German Red Army Faction, Italian Red Brigades, Japanese Red Army, and the French Direct Action, saw themselves as vanguards for the masses of the third world, a view the Soviet Union encouraged

covertly.

Occasionally, a revolutionary ethos and separatist purpose converged in this period. The Basque Nation and Liberty or ETA, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, the Peasant Front for the Liberation of Corsica, and the Irish Republican Army or the IRA are the best examples of such phenomena. But separatism always had a larger potential constituency than revolution, and over time separatism dominated these groups. The third wave produced its own distinguishing *modus operandi*: airline hijacking. More than 100 air hijacking occurred every year during the 1970s, reflecting an impulse for spec-

tacular acts by the terrorists, a theme expressed in the first wave but abandoned in the second for more effective military-like strikes. Planes were taken to get hostages, and hostage crises dominated the period. The most memorable hostage taking events includes the 1979 kidnapping and subsequent murder of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades, the Sandinistas taking over Nicaragua's Congress in 1978 and the Colombian M-19's failed takeover attempt of a foreign embassy in the 1980. The death knell of this era started in the early 1980s as revolutionary terrorists were defeated in one country after another.

rious terrorists, violence can become a sacramental act, dictated and legitimized by theology. The primary purpose of violent acts is not to extract particular concessions but to fulfill spiritual requirement. Loss of popular support is of little concern to these terrorists, since the act is done for God, or God's clerical proxy, not public opinion. This lack of any inhibitory factor leads to a sanctioning of almost limitless violence against a virtually open-ended category of targets: i.e. anyone who is not member of the terrorists' religion or religious sect. This explains the rhetoric common to 'holy terror' manifestos describing persons outside the terrorists' religious community in denigrating and dehumanizing terms as for example 'infidels', 'dogs', 'children of satan' etc. The purposeful use of such terminology to condone and justify terrorism is significant, in that it further erodes constraints on violence and bloodshed by portraying the terrorists' victims as either subhuman or unworthy of living. While religious terrorism is now synonymous with Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist groups, this era has also seen terrorists from other religious communities become active. Sikhs sought a religious state in the Punjab. Jewish terrorists attempted to blow up Islam's most sacred shrine in Jerusalem, waged an assassination campaign against Palestinian mayors, murdered 29 worshippers in Prophet Abraham's tomb in Hebron in 1994, and assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin in 1995.

The old problem of right-wing violence and terrorism has taken a more serious turn in terrorism's latest stage. Although right-wing terrorism is prevalent in many countries of the world, it has assumed a more deadly shape in the United States. As the third millennium starts, the convergence of antigovernment patriots and neo-Nazi white supremacists is the most disturbing development in American politics. These contemporary American terrorists, sworn to the overthrow of the government and a campaign of racial elimination, have become emboldened, brandishing a rhetoric of victimization and distrust that appeals to seemingly ancient hatreds and discontents. Technologically sophisticated and sometimes well financed, they preach a style of cultural politics directed at alienated white youths that is easily accessible on the Internet. No longer segregated to the shadowlands of popular culture, these organizations are becoming increasingly volatile and visible. The defining chapter rightwing terrorism was the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that killed 169 people. The bombing introduced many Americans to the disturbing underworld of domestic terrorism while shattering whatever illusions existed about terrorism as what an international or overseas threat.

Another trend in terrorism of the 1990s is the danger of terrorism being perpetrated by groups influenced by the prophecies of total disaster befalling the world and the start of a war to end all wars: Armageddon and the coming end of the millennium. Known in security analysts' jargon as "apocalyptic cult terrorism," this brand of terrorism has already made its mark. On March 20, 1995 Aum Shinrikyo, a Japanese apocalyptic cum pseudo religious group released sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo subway, killing 12 people,

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wave ebbed away when the Austrian archduke's assassination started World War I.

The second wave began in the 1920s and crested in the 1960s. National self-determination was the main stimulus of this era. The ambivalence of the colonial powers about their own legitimacy made them ideal targets for a politics of atrocity. A variety of new states—including Ireland, Israel, Cyprus and Algeria—emerged, and the wave receded largely as colonial powers faded away. For the terrorists of this period martyrdom was not on the top of their preferred mode of action, and so prominent political figures were not targets. Instead, the police forces, a government's "eyes and ears", were decimated by assassination campaigns, and their military replacements seemed too clumsy to cope without producing counteratrocities, which generated greater social support for the terrorists. Cellular structures, guerrilla-like hit-and-run actions against troops, concealed weapons and assailants without identifying insignia were the trademarks of this era.

Partly because anticolonial causes were more appealing to outsiders, defining these groups became problematic. The term *terrorist* had accumulated so many abusive connotations by this time that being identified as such carried enormous political liabilities, and rebels stopped calling themselves terrorists. Lehi (the "Stern Gang"), a Zionist revisionist group, was the last organization to describe its activity as terrorist. Members of Menachem Begin's infamous Irgun, concentrating on the end rather than means, described themselves as "freedom fighters" who were fighting government terror, a description that now became the norm. Governments returned the compliment, deeming every rebel who used violence a terrorist. The media complicated the situation further, refusing often to use terms consistently to avoid being seen as blatantly partisan. Thus developed an extraordinary situation whereby the same individuals in the



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The fourth wave has brought its own characteristics. In this era, the familiar third wave pattern of terrorism being mainly undertaken by nationalist and ethnic separatist groups as well as radical, entirely ideological (mainly Marxist-Leninist) motivated organizations is fading away and new actors emerging in the scene. Thus in the 1990s, one sees terrorist groups inspired by Marxism-Leninism declining in the West, their future prospects dimmed by the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. An example of such a trend is the German Red Army Faction, which in an eight-page communiqué issued in April 1998 announced it was ending its urban guerrilla battle characterized by savage campaigns of bombings and assassinations since the 1970s, and was disbanding itself. A new breed of terrorists motivated by religious, apocalyptic and right-wing beliefs and willing to inflict random and massive casualties is increasingly coming to portray the latest wave in the history of terrorism.

One of the new trends of the fourth phase of terrorism in the last two decades of the twentieth century is that violence and mass casualty attacks motivated by religion are becoming more common and more lethal. Religious terrorism has increasingly come to the forefront and the number of terrorist groups influenced primarily by religious causes has grown. In 1980 the US State Department listing of international terrorist groups contained scarcely a single religious organization. In 1998, when the then Secretary of State Madeline Albright announced a list of 30 of the world's most dangerous groups, over half were religious and included Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. If other violent religious groups around the world were added—including the many Christian militia and other paramilitary organizations found in the United States—the number of religious terrorist groups would be considerable.

As opposed to politically motivated terrorism, religious terrorism has different logic. For reli-

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