

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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Of all the passions capable of enslaving man's will, none is more incompatible with reason and liberty than religious fanaticism.

Robespierre

It happened in Washington, D.C., at a conference on terrorism—or, more precisely, counterterrorism—organized by the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). Most of the participants worked for the diverse (and numerous) American intelligence services, which had all, to varying degrees, become involved in the war on terrorism. After the Cold War, most of these cloak-and-dagger men had moved into the specialized and growing field of “new threats”—threats that also include nuclear proliferation, weapons of mass destruction, and organized crime. This strange gathering of identically dressed men listened attentively to a series of speakers hold forth on the essence of the counterterrorism struggle. Late in the day, however, as the last speaker was about to take the floor, a bizarre figure strode up to the podium carrying a briefcase and a bag. With his long hair and black hat, his thick beard, sunglasses, torn pants, and leather vest, he stood out like a sore thumb from the intelligence bureaucrats. Suddenly, opening the briefcase and bag with lightning speed, the stranger threw two hand grenades into the crowd and pointed an M16 rifle into the paralyzed audience.

There was no explosion, and the M16 remained mute. The man calmly took the microphone and began to address the audience. The lis-

teners, many of them at least, immediately recognized a familiar voice. In fact, it was the director of the DIA, a general who had disguised himself as a “terrorist” to demonstrate the ease with which anyone could gain entry into the building where the colloquium was being held (on the campus of George Washington University, where no security measures had been installed) and wipe out the cream of the American counterterrorist crop. Back in uniform, the general had these prophetic words to say: “One day, terrorists will attack a building like this, in Washington or New York. They will kill hundreds of people and deal us an unprecedented psychological blow. The question is not whether such an attack will occur on American soil, but when and where. It is up to you, gentlemen, to be prepared. The security of our territory is in your hands.” The colloquium took place in 1998. Three years later, nineteen determined men killed some three thousand people in the worst terrorist attack in history, striking New York and Washington, D.C. The Pentagon itself, headquarters of the DIA, was hit. In their negligence, the American intelligence services had been unable to prevent the operation.

In hindsight, this scenario seems almost surreal. First, because of the warning issued by the Pentagon intelligence chief, and secondly because of his staff’s inability to follow his advice despite its specificity. There was also a disconnect between the quaint picture of a marginal fanatic—practically the living image of the cartoon anarchist in black cape, bomb in hand—prepared to blow the place to smithereens and the speechifying on the imminence of high-tech terrorism, the notorious “hyper-terrorism” against which all new policies were being drafted.

The terrorist phenomenon is more difficult to conceptualize than it would at first appear to be. The issue tends to be confused by ideological interpretations, along with the temptation, especially on the part of governments, to resort to diabolical imagery whenever the term is trotted out. A good place to start might be by recalling that the point of terror is to terrorize—a role historically assumed by organized force, be it state or army, at least when it comes to despotic regimes. That has always been the case with nondemocratic countries. In other contexts, in times of war, terror may be legitimized, even when deployed against civilians. In the modern era, the bombing of Coventry, Dresden, and Tokyo,¹ and the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, come to mind.

Terror in the name of religion, holy terror, is a recurring historical phenomenon. A well-known example of this were the first-century Jewish Zealots, also known as the *sicarii*. This murderous sect helped to in-

cite an uprising against the Roman occupation that resulted, *inter alia*, in the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. and the Diaspora. The Isma'ili sect known as the Assassins was an Islamic correlate.² For two centuries, between 1090 and 1272, it made the political assassination of Muslim dignitaries by the blade its trademark. No Christian sect ever used terror to such harrowing effect, although we might note the fifteenth-century Taborites of Bohemia, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, and the active anti-Semitism of the first crusade in 1095, not to mention the excesses of the Inquisition. In any case, messianic movements traffic in and thrive on terror.³

Messianism postulates that one day in the not-too-distant future, the world will be completely transformed by an event marking the end of history. In early Christianity, the belief in an imminent end signaling the Second Coming of Christ (*Parousia*) was common. The idea of an apocalypse is closely linked to various messianic schools of thought, and not exclusively among the revealed religions. The Aztecs believed that four suns (four worlds) had come and gone. They were haunted by the fear that the world would end if the sun failed to receive its due tribute of human blood.

The messianic spirit lived on within Judaism (in the seventeenth-century movement of Sabbatai Zevi, for instance). Immediately following Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, the return to the "promised land" provoked a messianic revival in the form of the creation of Gush Emunim, with its dynamic push to colonize Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). Christian messianism is manifest today among certain fundamentalist Protestant sects with roots in the nineteenth century. Among such sects, the powerful Evangelical movement is especially attuned to Israel's fortunes, since its adherents believe that Israel's ultimate victory is a precondition for the *Parousia*. Islam has its own movements of this kind, especially with respect to the awaited coming of the Mahdi, its counterpart to the Christian Messiah. Messianism is central to the Twelver Shiism of Iran, with its anticipation of the twelfth imam. Although theirs is a political conflict, the events and antagonisms that fuel the violent clashes between radical Islam and the United States, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, also have a messianic dimension to them. Contrary to a fairly widespread view, they have nothing to do with a "clash of civilizations." Such animosity is equally raw within societies as between them, as evidenced, for instance, by the 1979 attack on the Great Mosque in Mecca by radical, mostly Saudi, Sunnis, or the 1995 assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, deemed by a member of Gush Emunim to be complicit in the abandonment of Judea and Samaria.⁴

Religious terrorism is seen by its practitioners as a transcendental act. Justified by the religious authorities, it gives full sanction to actors who thus become instruments of the divine. The number and identity of the victims is of no importance. There is no judge higher than the cause for which the terrorist has sacrificed himself. The perpetrators of the first, only partially successful attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 had first obtained a fatwa from Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, now imprisoned in the United States.

Despite this brief digression into religion, or at least one facet of it, our main focus of study is terrorism, which for many contemporary readers may boil down to Islamic terrorism. Let us recall in this respect that theological and political issues are closely bound up with each other in Islam. This distinctive aspect of Islam can be traced to its early days, when the high chief—to draw on more familiar vocabulary—was both religious and political leader. This ideal was later abandoned. A political apparatus arose, relatively distinct from the religious and legal apparatus, but in Muslim thought that ideal remained a unique structure, Islam, via the Qurʾan, embodied in the concept of *din wa dawla* (religion and state). The Christian Church arose in very different circumstances. Even when Christianity became the official religion of empire in the fourth century, the religious and political apparatuses remained separate, although the Church was briefly inclined to impose its rule over temporal leaders in the Middle Ages.

Religious movements have always broken up into sects. Schismatic movements have always claimed to be the true interpreters of the original creed. Nowadays, sectarians affiliated with radical Islam, having flirted with and abandoned guerrilla warfare, are characterized by their use of terrorism colored by religion, interpreted to promote mobilization and involvement to further political ends.

We shall not dwell here on the never-ending parade of despotic regimes that have left their mark on Chinese history, from the foundation of a unified Chinese state in the third century B.C.E. to Mao Zedong; nor on the societies of the ancient Orient and India (except to note the surprising exception in India of Aśoka, a sovereign who sought to rule in accordance with the precepts of Buddhism); nor on the Islamic empires, which, like all governments, preferred injustice to disorder, and the last of which, the Ottoman empire, unscrupulously exploited terror. Nor was the West deficient in that regard until the emergence of embryonic democracies in Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, the United States, and France. Moreover, the first French republic lapsed in the name of

virtue into terror, which reached its zenith in 1794 with the Law of 22 Prairial prohibiting witnesses and legal representation for the defense and authorizing the Revolutionary Tribunal to pass death sentences on the basis of conviction alone.

History—or, more precisely, the chronicles of the vanquished whose perspective has colored the historical record—continues to reverberate with the generalized terror incited by the Mongols and their explosive emergence in the thirteenth century, equaled only by Tamerlane and his pyramids of heads after the fall of Baghdad. Our own twentieth century, which produced Nazism and the Stalinist terror, will be remembered as the century of genocides—from those of the Armenians of the Ottoman empire in 1915–16 and in Rwanda in 1994 (committed to general international indifference) to that of the Jews and the Gypsies from 1942 to 1945. It will also be remembered for its massacres of specific social groups, such as the kulaks in Russia, real or suspected counterrevolutionaries, so-called inferior races, and so on.

Legion, too, are the religious sects or other groupings on a holy mission that have wielded terror with abandon. Until their elimination in the nineteenth century, the so-called Thugs terrorized travelers throughout India. Thuggee was a sect of stranglers, membership in which began at an early age, often passing from father to son, but also through the kidnapping of very young children. At the age of ten or eleven, boys were allowed to accompany the killers and watch from a distance, under the guidance of a tutor, to learn the skills of the sect's trade and, above all, how to keep quiet. They actively participated from puberty on.

The sect worshipped Kali, Hindu goddess of death. According to the Thugs, she had created two men from the perspiration of her armpits to help her battle demons; in reward, she had given them permission to kill without remorse, so long as they did not spill blood. Thuggee religious tradition held that, in the beginning, the goddess had removed the corpses by devouring them. One day, however, a novice had turned and seen the goddess at her meal. In punishment, she had thenceforth refused to dispose of the bodies herself. Instead, she ordered the faithful to chop them up and bury them, and then to perform a ceremonial ritual.

Right up to the early nineteenth century, thousands of travelers disappeared every year. When a Thug was taken prisoner, the Mogul authorities had him immured alive or cut off his hands and nose. In 1830, the British set about dismantling the sect, and it ultimately vanished.

Terrorism is above all a *tool* or, if you will, a *technique*. This technique is as old as warfare itself, contrary to the widespread notion that

terrorism was the offspring of nineteenth-century nationalist movements. The confusion may be a result of the late appearance of the term in the French Revolution and its Terror.

Like all political phenomena, terrorism is defined by the duality between professed ideas and their implementation. And, like all political phenomena, terrorism exists only in a cultural and historical context. For three decades, the activities of terrorist movements were closely linked to Marxist ideology; Marxist terrorist groups are in the minority today, whereas they predominated in the 1970s and 1980s. The same applies to the entire history of terrorist movements, shaped by the political context in which they are born, live, and die. While terrorism is a phenomenon that is continuously reinventing itself, the lack of continuity between each generation of terrorists often entails a signal break with the past.

These days, the importance of the cultural component is more evident in terrorist movements of religious inspiration than in those of a nationalist or strictly ideological bent. It is the religious movements that are making themselves heard. Hamas and al Qaeda, in particular, combine political or pseudo-political aspirations (the destruction of Israel and/or the United States) with a religious undertone that serves the primary purpose of recruitment and thus finds an echo in the ideology of other movements. It should be noted that the early phase of Palestinian terrorism was essentially political and secular, only drifting into religiosity in the 1980s, following the Iranian revolution.

A terrorist organization is virtually by definition opposed to the state apparatus. The nature of that opposition often defines a movement's character. Where the state apparatus is essentially rational, the terrorist party will tend to appeal strongly to emotion. Where the state machinery operates on the basis of "realist" policies and an understanding of the balance of power, the terrorist movement will imbue its politics with a powerful moral tone (whose code varies depending on the ideology in play) and a weak-versus-strong strategy reliant for the most part on its psychological impact on the adversary. Raymond Aron had a felicitous way of getting to the heart of the matter: "A violent action is deemed terrorist when its psychological effects are disproportionate to its purely physical results."

Today's terrorism is what specialists call group or bottom-up terrorism, but top-down (state) terrorism has been far more prevalent throughout history. It enjoyed its heyday in the twentieth century with the advent of totalitarianism. In terms of victims, top-down terrorism has taken a vastly higher toll than its bottom-up counterpart.

In this study, our focus is on bottom-up terrorism, but not exclusively. As a tool, whether it be top-down or bottom-up, terror espouses the same strategic principle: to bend one's adversary's will while affecting his capacity for resistance. Until very recently, no one spoke of "state terrorism." State terrorism, as it is understood today, applies above all to the support provided by certain governments (Libya or Iran, for instance) to terrorist groups, but it takes many other forms. It is also a tool employed systematically by totalitarian regimes. A state's terrorism is also manifest in the military doctrine of its armed forces. The doctrine of "strategic bombing," for example, developed in the West in the 1930s, was based entirely on the terror incited by the mass bombing of civilian populations to compel governments to surrender. This doctrine resulted in the bombing of Dresden and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The boundaries between top-down and bottom-up terrorism are often blurred, as exemplified by Lenin before 1917 and after he seized power. We have all seen today's terrorist become tomorrow's head of state, with whom governments will have to deal at the diplomatic level. Menahem Begin exemplifies this typical metamorphosis.

Western tradition considers violence legitimate only when it is practiced by the state. Such a limited definition takes no account of the terror practiced by those who have no other means of redressing a situation they deem to be oppressive. The legitimacy of a terrorist act lies in the objectives of its agents. We need only imagine interviews with terrorists of yore to grasp the idea that "the end justifies the means" is the engine of most terrorist activity. It is the cause embraced by a terrorist movement, rather than its mode of action, that is subject to moral evaluation. In the context of the wars of national liberation of the 1950s and 1960s, terrorist activities are often seen in a positive light because they hastened the liberation of oppressed peoples. Those agents of terrorism—be they in Algeria or Indochina—are heroes. For the most part, they harbor no regrets. It all boils down to idea of a "just war" that legitimates violent action.

In the West and elsewhere, however, there is the tendency to label an action "terrorist" when it is deemed to be illegal. This always dangerous confusion between the moral interpretation of a political act and the act itself clouds our understanding of the terrorist phenomenon. An act is deemed "terrorist" when it smacks of fanaticism or when the aims of its perpetrators seem neither legitimate nor coherent. The observer becomes lost in the labyrinth of terrorist movements, which have varied

down the centuries and evolved in distinct historical and cultural contexts. Another confusion arises from the idea that the terrorist act is by definition one aimed at civilians.⁵ The civilian population becomes a target of the indirect strategy when its fate as a potential victim can influence the decisions taken by its leaders. The notion that the fate of civilians automatically sways the political leadership represents a contemporary, contingent understanding of politics. It is commonly accepted that the concept of popular sovereignty—exploited, incidentally, to justify state terror—emerged only with the Enlightenment. Somewhat later, political terrorism evolved with the shift in mentality—nineteenth-century Russian populists, for instance, were heavily influenced by the romantic tradition.

If modern terrorism tends in practice mainly to target civilians, the phenomenon derives in fact from the general evolution of political structures and the emergence of the mass media. In the West, political structures have evolved toward democracy since the late eighteenth century. The modern media, a critical component of liberal democracy, emerged in tandem. Now, the political legitimacy of a democracy and its elected representatives lies by definition with its citizens, which is why terrorism is more effective against democratic countries than against dictatorships. This is not, as is widely thought, because dictatorships are more efficient at finding and punishing terrorists—although they do have greater leeway than democracies in doing so—but because the impact of an attack is broader in a free country than in one whose people have no voice in government and the media serve or are controlled by the state. It is therefore not inaccurate to affirm that modern terrorism is in part a consequence of democracy.

That does not mean, however, that the phenomenon of terrorism is necessarily linked to democracy, as the exploitation of terror predates the modern democratic state. And yet—and this is where confusion tends to arise—“predemocratic” terrorism was practiced in other forms, which, at first sight, would seem to be quite distinct from the terrorism we know today.

One of the earliest manifestations of the terrorist technique is what was once called “tyrannicide”—a term long fallen into obsolescence. Traditionally, an attack on a tyrant was carried out in the name of justice. Tyrannicide was the most widespread form of terrorism of the pre-modern era. The most fearsome organization of that period, acting in the name of ideological purity, was the Assassin sect, active in the thirteenth

and fourteenth centuries. It bears some resemblance to certain contemporary terrorist organizations.

No society has a monopoly on terrorism, and over the course of history, terrorist acts have left their mark on any number of geographical and cultural spheres. The Zealots (or *sicarii*) and the Assassins, for instance, were active in the Middle East, which remains a haven for important terrorist organizations to this day. Following World War II, the state of Israel forced its way onto the scene via a strategy that drew on terrorist tactics. The Palestinians draw on terrorism today against Israel. For several centuries, Central Asia and the Middle East were prey to the terror practiced by various nomad armies, including those of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. Since the nineteenth century, Russia has been the theater of numerous acts of terrorism, including the state terror on which the entire Soviet edifice relied for seven decades. Today, terrorism in Russia is once again “bottom-up.” In Europe, the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) demonstrated the readiness with which opposing armies resorted to terror. More recently, Europe has been swept by diverse waves of terrorism: anarchists, Irish terrorism, the activities of ideological groups such as the Red Brigades in Italy and the German Red Army Fraction, and, most recently, the Basque and Corsican movements.

The United States experienced anarchist attacks in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the assassination of political figures (Lincoln, McKinley) owes something to the tradition of tyrannicide—John Wilkes Booth cried out “*Sic semper Tyrannis!*” (“Ever thus to tyrants!”) as he killed Lincoln—and deep-rooted in American history. The activities of a semi-clandestine organization like the Ku Klux Klan are also based on terror through the practice of lynching. Organizations of the far right, to a certain degree following in the KKK’s footsteps, continue to deploy terrorist tactics (such as the Oklahoma City bombing) but by increasingly sophisticated modern means. Long spared international terrorism on its own soil, the United States was tragically struck on September 11, 2001.

Sub-Saharan Africa, which had long seemed immune, has in recent years fallen victim to the terrorism of regular armies, irregulars, and armed bands. The problem is particularly acute in the Great Lakes region, where the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has claimed three million victims, mostly civilians. The use of terror in Africa echoes that of the Thirty Years’ War. In the context of globalization, Africa has, tangentially, become a terrorist target, as evidenced by the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. For its part,

Latin America was once the theater of myriad guerrilla conflicts, including in the cities. The guerrillas naturally resorted to terrorist tactics, especially in the kind of guerrilla warfare waged by the Tupamaros in Uruguay.

In Iran, in 1979, radical Islamism burst onto the scene in its Shiite incarnation. That same year, the war in Afghanistan—with the help of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan—abetted the rise of radical Sunni Islamism. The movement was swelled by elements from virtually all Muslim countries, other than those of sub-Saharan Africa, and turned against the United States once the USSR had withdrawn from Afghanistan. Its hostility to the United States was manifest in a series of attacks in the mid 1990s. That of September 11, 2001, marked its acme and led to Washington's punitive expedition against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the entity known as al Qaeda. The Bush administration accused Iraq of harboring weapons of mass destruction, having links to al Qaeda, and representing a threat to world peace and to U.S. security. Ostensibly part of the global struggle against terrorism, the ensuing war, unilaterally decided on, has been a source of difficulties unforeseen by Washington's hawks.

One cannot condemn terrorism without condemning all violence of every stripe. One must, at the very least, consider why and by whom it is being practiced. Like war, and perhaps even more so, terrorism preys on minds and wills. At first glance, the democracies would seem to be especially vulnerable. And yet, if the challenge is great or even fundamental, people prove themselves surprisingly capable of enduring it and the psychological tensions it begets. Terrorism is justified as a last resort. In the real world, the weak have no other weapon against the strong. Many movements that later became legitimate have used it. As for states, the monopolists of legal violence, they are designed and duty-bound to defend themselves.

Generally speaking, any movement with a certain degree of social substance practices terrorism as a pressure tactic in order to squeeze concessions and a negotiated solution from the state. In the case of militant Islamism, the characteristic that sets it apart from all other movements, past and present, is that it has nothing to negotiate. The truth is that its fight is to the death.

As an international phenomenon, terrorism is more of a galling nuisance than a truly destabilizing force, except for its psychological impact. Terrorism is the price—ultimately, a rather modest one—paid by the West, and especially the United States, for its hegemony. The trick, if one

has the political acumen to learn it, is to avoid fueling it while claiming to fight it.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

EPIGRAPH: Artarit, *Robespierre*, 71.

1. The firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945 killed between 80,000 and 100,000 people.

2. See, e.g., Lewis, *Assassins*.

3. See, e.g., Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*.

4. See Sprinzak, *Brother against Brother*, and “Fundamentalism, Terrorism and Democracy.”

5. Carr, *Lessons of Terror*, 66–67, for instance, sees terrorist acts as targeting civilians exclusively, which would exclude the Assassins.