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Targeting Civilians: Terrorism, Evil, and Moral Judgment

Jiayuan Wang

The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Beijing, China
jennifer_wjy2008@outlook.com

Abstract. This article critically examines the moral and philosophical dimensions of terrorism, with a focus on the deliberate targeting of civilians. The discussion revolves around three fundamental questions: is attacking individuals considered terrorism, are such actions inherently immoral, and is it still necessary to investigate the underlying motivations? The study argues that deliberately instigating fear and violence among non-combatants aligns with essential concepts of terrorism, including definitions from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the United Nations. The article thereafter employs utilitarian and Kantian frameworks to analyze ethical evaluation. Kant maintains that perceiving individuals as means rather than ends is a violation of categorical imperatives, rendering such actions intrinsically immoral, irrespective of intent. Conversely, a utilitarian perspective acknowledges intentions and outcomes, allowing for conditional moral justification, albeit at the peril of detrimental relativism and the validation of violent justifications. In response to Michael Walzer and Judith Butler's objections, the paper stresses the dangers of moral relativism and how controversial the word "terrorism" is. Ultimately, it concludes that whereas assaulting civilians constitutes both terrorism and malevolence, rectifying fundamental political disparities and preventing repetition necessitate an understanding of the underlying causes. The strategy achieves a balance between moral absolutes and practical elements in order to bring about justice and stability around the world.

Keywords: terrorism, civilians, Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, moral relativism.

1. Introduction

The 20th century witnessed intense debate over the topic of terrorism, especially in the aftermath of the 911 attack. The prompt question can be divided into three sub-questions worth discussing: 1. whether the actions of targeting civilians should be considered terrorism; 2. whether this kind of action is evil; and 3. whether the motives and causes are worth analysis.

2. Literature review

The first question is whether targeting civilians is terrorism. According to the United Nations, terrorism is defined as criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with intent to cause death or serious bodily injury or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in groups of persons or particular persons [1]. The Stanford Philosophy

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Dictionary, in another way, defines terrorism as a type of violent experience of terror or fear for the sake of a further aim such as coercion, or some more specific political objective [2].

When civilians become the main target, huge threats appear toward ordinary residents' lives; at the same time, the controllers behind the scenes seek fear from innocent people and aim to cause severe damage to them. These attempts to create fear and harm ordinary life make their actions undoubtedly terrorism. Typical examples of terrorist actions causing irreversible damage to society and citizens are the 911 terrorist attack and the Café Wars led by Algerian nationalist organization FLN (Front de Libération National). Hence, targeting civilians is no doubt a terrorist action.

However, some scholars have expressed their doubts and concerns about this definition of terrorism. Judith Butler critiques the term 'terrorism' as a discursive tool of state hegemony [3]. What actions can be defined as terrorist actions, and what groups can be defined as terrorists, depend on the power structure behind the narratives of terrorism. Take the US governmental usage as an example: while the famous 911 attack in New York City is generally identified as terrorist action in the US, the nuclear bombings of Japanese cities conducted by the United States during World War II were seldom criticized as terrorist actions.

While the critics of the definition of terrorism seem plausible to some extent, we still need a general idea of terrorism for the sake of discussion. Michael Walzer rejects the blurry notion of terrorism and the common saying "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" [4]. With the unclear definition of terrorism, the discussion can not be presented in a logically precise way. Thus, even if the notion is contested, I would still consider targeting civilians as terrorism under generally accepted definitions.

3. Methodology

Then come the following questions: "Is targeting civilians evil?" and "Is there a need to consider the causes behind it?" Such questions are related to a core ethics question of moral judgment, and in the next part, I will explore the answers to the questions with Kantian and Benthamite principles of moral judgment.

4. Results

The given claim "when civilians are the main target, it is terrorism and evil, without need to consider the cause" seems to be in line with Kantian view on moral judgment. Kantian ethics principles are based on rational judgment of moral laws, or categorical imperatives. He comes up with three formulations of categorical imperatives as benchmarks of moral judgment: 1. maxim should be universal; 2. treating others as an end but never as means; 3. people should be rational moral lawmakers [5]. According primarily to Kant, actions that do not pass the first and second formulation should be categorized as evil without considering their motives [6]. Traditional examples of this judgment are lying and murder. These actions make no sense if they are universally spread and disobey human nature. Indeed, just like lying and murder, targeting civilians cannot be universalized and discriminate against legal and ethical human rights, which makes it reasonable to consider such actions as evil.

However, Kantian principles lean toward absolutism and fail to consider practical factors in real-life situations, especially in war. Simple examples of this are the guerrilla warfare and national liberation events. Specifically, it is hard to fully distinguish civilians from the armed army during these situations. Civilians might engage in the actual war affair in multiple ways. Thus, even though

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there is no doubt that actions targeting civilians should be considered evil, the cause of these actions should be analyzed elaborately based on the complex situation in a real-life environment.

On the other hand, Utilitarians try to deal with the problem of absolutism by calculating the motives and possible outcomes of an act in practice. According to Bentham's principles of Hedonic Calculus (calculation of happiness), "the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people, in order to act morally" [7], the moral judgment of an action depends on analysis of its possible outcomes. Based on Benthamite principles, the motives of targeting civilians should be taken into consideration in moral judgment [8]. If the aim of targeting civilians is for the larger good and benefit of more, then the action can be judged as morally permissible; but if the cause of targeting non-combatants is merely harming and horrifying, then the action should be immoral and evil.

Imagine in a war situation, pilot A bombed a factory to cause massive casualties and horror in the society of the enemy country, in order to threaten them out of war. This behavior should undeniably count as terrorism and evil. However, if pilot B bombed the factory to stop them from producing mass destructive missiles to prevent future disasters of a larger scale, then such an act would be morally permissible. When the action of targeting civilians focuses on spreading fear of terror across society and destroying everyday life, just like the 911 attack, it should be perceived as evil. On the other hand, if targeting civilians comes with the motive of ending a more serious evil, for example, the Manhattan Project during World War II, such military operations under exceptional circumstances should be understood as at least morally permissible.

Nevertheless, there are problems with utilitarian judgments, too. Moral relativism might appear if excuses for targeting civilians are allowed. Terrorists and criminals would always be able to find possible excuses for their deeds, which might further cause the slippery slope fallacy in moral judgments [9]. Walzer also argues that almost all terrorists tend to have excuses for their evil terrorist deeds, and relativism is dangerous because it will keep oppressed groups from trying other solutions and they may go for terrorist actions directly [10]. Thus, in order to avoid the moral relativism caused by utilitarian justifications for harming civilians, dangerous excuses for terrorism should be seriously rejected without considering the causes and motives behind it.

5. Discussion

With the analysis of the problems caused by utilitarian judgments, we still need a basic moral benchmark in the face of relativism. Targeting civilians should be judged as evil without considering its causes. According to Walzer's Just War theory, there should be a distinction between non-combatants and combatants in wartime. During the war, civilians are obviously innocent non-combatants, and should not carry the harm made by the war with "the right to leave and the right not to be killed" [10]. Following the ideas suggested above, terrorist actions should be judged evil without considering the reasons and motives behind them. Thus the Café Wars led by the Nigerian FLN terrorism group is categorically evil, even if they claimed that their actions aimed to free their people's souls. The logic of "killing one European will set free one Nigerian's soul" is not correct: not all Europeans are oppressors [11]. Groups of people like children are innocent during the terrorist attack and should not pay their lives for it in any logic. Therefore, no matter what the terrorists claim is the noble goal behind their actions, targeting civilians is categorically evil, for the sake of moral judgment.

At the same time, the causes and motives of terrorist actions should still be listened to and considered. They might not serve as the reason for society to forgive and forget about the terrorist actions, yet they can help in the further research of terrorist actions and assist in finding the solutions to global injustice. Not considering the causes and motives of terrorist actions will

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foreclose possibilities to understand the current political situation [3]. Some terrorist actions are conducted by national liberating groups in some nations and places with political goals for justice and liberation. For moral judgment, such actions are terrorist and evil, but we still need to analyze the social and political contexts of the emergence of such terrorist groups and ideas, in order to build a more just global political environment, where oppression and injustice can be discussed and solved through peaceful ways.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, by thoroughly considering moral ethics and real-life situations, I firmly believe that actions targeting civilians should be considered terrorism and evil. The action targeting civilians fits the mainstream definitions of terrorism and is definitely evil according to Kantian moral principles. However, the motives and causes behind the actual actions provide researchers with valuable information for possible solutions to the problems of terrorist actions. This opinion on attacks targeting civilians reveals the actions' underlying nature and encourages further discussion on the motives that help to solve the problems better. Additional research on relative topics can pay attention to the motivations behind the attacks.

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