

RELIGIOUS TERRORIST GROUPS AND POLITICAL POWER: AN AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP

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Religious terrorism is often perceived as an anti-State phenomenon, which operates to destabilize political institutions. Therefore, it is also usually seen as apart from political power and institutions or, in some cases, as sponsored by *rogue states* in order to destabilize other states. This paper will deal with domestic religious terrorism in democratic regimes and its relations with political power. It will analyze three case studies of religious terrorist groups rooted in the main world religions, in order to identify some possible political factors facilitating the creation and the development of a religious terrorist group out of a fundamentalist background, investigating about the role played in this process by segments of the political elite and the state apparatus, in contexts where terrorists belong to the religion professed by the majority of a population.

Introduction: What is terrorism?

There is disagreement among scholars and institutions dealing with political violence, about the role that can be played by states and political power in terrorism, and the opportunity of including acts carried out or supported by state actors in a definition of this phenomenon.

According to Bruce Hoffman, all the history of this concept, since its creation at the time of the French Revolution, has been characterized by the presence of both a top-down definition and a bottom-up definition of terrorism, each one prevailing in particular moments. At the time of the Revolution, *le régime de la terreur* was a state policy of repression carried out by the revolutionary authorities (therefore, by state power). Thus, terrorism became associated “with the abuse of office and power”. After the popularization of the term operated by James Burke, and the spread of anti-monarchical sentiments

and groups all over Europe, however, terrorism was more and more considered as the subversion of the political order established by God. These revolutionary connotations were retained by the concept until World War I. After the creation of totalitarian regimes in several European countries, in the 1930s the meaning changed again, and the concept was increasingly used (at least in the democratic world) to define “practices of mass repression employed by totalitarian states and their dictatorial leaders against their own citizens”. After World War II, the term fully regained its revolutionary connotations.¹

Among scholars and academic institutions, some include state terrorism in their definitions of the phenomenon: for example, James F. Rinehart (“limited, organized, premeditated violence, carried out by both state and non state actors, that is calculated to instill a sense of instability, disorder and, most importantly, a fear of future, greater violence, in order to achieve specific and purposeful political goals”).²

The opposite choice is made by Bruce Hoffman (“deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change”);³ and John R. Thackrah (“an organised system of extreme and violent intimidation to create instability within democracies. International terrorists seek to launch indiscriminate and unpredictable attacks on groups [...] or nations to change the politicoeconomic balance of the world”);⁴

Some others even explicitly or implicitly deny the existence of state terrorism: for example James M. Lutz and Brenda J. Lutz (“terrorism involves political aims and motives. It is violent or threatens violence. It is designed to generate fear [...]. The violence is conducted through an identifiable

¹ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003, pp. 3-17

² James F. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence. Prophets of Terror*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, p. 16

³ Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 40

⁴ John R. Thackrah, “Terrorism: A Definitional Problem”, in Paul Wilkinson and A. M. Stewart, eds., *Contemporary Research on Terrorism*, Abardeen University Press, Abardeen, 1987, p. 38

organization. The violence involves a non state actor or actors [...]. Finally, the acts of violence are designed to create power in situations in which power previously had been lacking”);⁵

Indeed, as observed by John R. Thackrah, this “Babylonian confusion of meanings” is not only due to academic disputes, but also to the fact that “the very process of definition is in itself part of the wider conflict between ideologies and political objectives”.⁶ Thus, scholars dealing with political and military conflicts between sovereign states and non governmental armed groups (such those between Israel and the Palestinian groups; between Sri Lanka’s Government and the LTTE; or between the international coalition and the guerrilla forces in Iraq and Afghanistan) will be more or less motivated – in accordance with their particular ideological stance – to include at least some actions carried out by national armies and security forces as “terrorist”; and to define the violent struggle against state power as “terrorism”, “insurgency”, or “resistance”.

Moreover, the definitions of terrorism are often designed in order to find out possible countermeasures to the phenomenon, and they correspond to the needs of the definers and the type of society they want to maintain. Thus, even among the US institutions, the Department of State (“premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetuated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups and clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”) and the Central Intelligence Agency (“politically motivated violence that is carried out either by subnational groups or by clandestine agents of a government, and that involves more than one nationality when one considers who the perpetrators and the victims are, and where the attack is carried out”) assign a role to state actors which is not mentioned in the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s definition (“the unlawful use of force or violence against

⁵ James M. Lutz and Brenda J. Lutz, *Global Terrorism*, Routledge, London/New York, 2004, p. 10

⁶ John R. Thackrah, *op. cit.*, p. 25

persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives”).⁷

This paper argues that these divergences about the admissibility of state terrorism can be overcome through two theoretical expedients: first of all, focusing on what is a terrorist act (and not on who is a terrorist or what is a terrorist group); and also forgetting the realist “state as single actor” paradigm (which is sometimes suitable to deal with monocratic political systems such as totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, but it is not useful to describe developed democracies). A state is indeed formed by a plurality of agencies and subjects, often with different worldviews, agendas and strategies.

In this work will be used a minimal definition of terrorist acts, regarded as *premeditated, unlawful acts of political violence aiming at creating fear and instability*.

Religious fundamentalism and religious terrorism

What is the role played by the religious factor in terrorism? As explained by Gus Martin, religion can be schematically identified as cause of terrorism in two different cases. In some contexts, religion is just a *secondary motive* for ethno-nationalist, revolutionary or pro-independence groups (as it is, for example, for Northern Ireland Catholic and Protestant fighters: although religious affiliation is a key element of their identity, “their ultimate goal is grounded in their secular identity”). Religion is a *primary motive* for terrorism, instead, when it is at the core of the “political, social and revolutionary agendas” of the groups, “[...] the driving force behind their behavior”.⁸

⁷ All quoted from Rinehart, *op. cit.*, p. 13; and Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 31

⁸ Gus Martin, *Understanding Terrorism. Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2003, pp. 187-188

Groups belonging to this latter category are, mostly, fundamentalist groups. Since the concept of fundamentalism was first adopted (after the Iranian revolution in 1979) to define a particular kind of religious resurgence spread worldwide, there have been many attempts, from different perspectives, to define it. Probably the most authoritative – although far from being accepted by the whole academic community – is the one summarizing the findings of the *Fundamentalism Project* (FP), a research promoted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, with the participation of dozens of prominent social scientists from different disciplines, trying to find the common features of all fundamentalisms.

The FP's detailed definition of fundamentalism has nine sections, five related to the fundamentalist ideology, and four to the groups' organization:

- 1) *Reactivity to the marginalization of religion.* Fundamentalist movements are “concerned first with the erosion of religion and its role in society”, and they therefore protect “some religious content, some set of traditional cosmological beliefs and associated norms of conduct”.⁹
- 2) *Selectivity.* Fundamentalism is not merely defensive of the tradition, but “selects and reshapes aspects” of it, that differentiate fundamentalist ideology from the religious mainstream. Similarly, fundamentalists accept some sides of modernity (particularly its technological and organizational features), but refuse others (mainly the ideological underpinnings of modernity, such as relativism, secularism, and pluralism), some of which are singled out “for special attention, usually in the form of focused opposition”.
- 3) *Moral manicheism.* The fundamentalist worldview considers reality to be “uncompromisingly divided into light [...] and darkness[...]. The

⁹ This and the following quotations are from Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan and R. Scott Appleby, “Fundamentalism: Genus and Species”, in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press., 1995, pp. 399-424

world outside the group is therefore contaminated, sinful, doomed; the world inside is a pure and redeemed ‘remnant’”.

- 4) *Absolutism and inerrancy.* Fundamentalists share a belief in the inerrancy of their sacred texts, “or its analogues (e.g., papal infallibility, a privileged school of Islamic jurisprudence, etc.)”; with a recognizable approach to sacred sources, which opposes the hermeneutical methods.
- 5) *Millennialism and messianism.* In their view, history has a miraculous culmination, when “the good will triumph over evil”; and “the end of days, preceded by trials and tribulations, will be ushered in by the Messiah, the Savior; the Hidden Imam”.
- 6) *Elect, chosen membership.* The militants of the fundamentalist groups tend to consider their membership as “‘elect’, chosen, divinely called”.
- 7) *Sharp boundaries.* Among fundamentalist movements is widespread the idea of a separation between the faithful and the sinful, with the notion “of a dividing wall and other spatial metaphors”. The separation can be physical, or “implemented through audiovisual boundaries, through a distinctive vocabulary, and through control over access to the media”.
- 8) *Authoritarian organization.* Although membership is voluntary, with frequent trends towards equalitarianism, “the typical form of fundamentalism organization is charismatic, a leader-follower relationship”. The tension between these two features makes movements sometimes fragile. Moreover, “since there can be no loyal opposition, there is a tendency toward fragmentation”.
- 9) *Behavioral requirements.* “The member’s time, space, and activity are a group resource, not an individual one”. In order to create “a powerful affective dimension, an imitative, conforming dimension”, groups thus have “distinctive music, [...] rules for dress [...] drinking, sexuality, appropriate speech, and the discipline of children”, with censorship of reading and audio-visual material.

Although this definition can reveal a lot about what drives individuals and groups towards religious violence, scholars acknowledge that “not all fundamentalists are terrorists, or even potential terrorists”.¹⁰ Indeed, throughout the world there are millions of peaceful people who correspond to the above definition, but who never thought about using violence in order to promote or defend their faith. What, then, makes a terrorist, out of a religious fundamentalist?

Among the features of fundamentalism just reviewed, maybe the most emphasized by scholars dealing with religious terrorism is the tendency toward millennialism and messianism. According to James Rinehart,¹¹ millennialism is the core characteristic not only of religious terrorist groups, but also of some non religious ones, such as Sendero Luminoso. According to his work, largely based on Norman Cohn’s research, millennial worldviews usually arise in response to a foreign domination, when the existing social order is threatened. The “millenarian paradigm”, according to Rinehart, has these basic components:

A community composed of deeply ethnocentric people, disrupted by a perceptibly wicked, evil, and alienating power of seemingly demonic dimension that upsets and menaces their traditional way of life. In the presence of such danger, the community comes to be convinced that their [*sic*] role and purpose must be defended to death largely because they are God’s chosen Elect, destined to ensure that righteousness overcomes evil. Triumph, which is viewed as inexorable and according to God’s plan, represents the true finale of history, which reveals itself as a heaven on earth.¹²

¹⁰ James M. Lutz and Brenda J. Lutz, *Global Terrorism*, Routledge, London/New York 2004, p. 65

¹¹ Rinehart uses the term “millenarianism”: however, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the two words are interchangeable, although some use “millennialism” only when dealing with the Christian version of the phenomenon. See the web page <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9052706/millennialism> (august 8, 2007)

¹² Rinehart, *op. cit.*, p. 23

In this view (which also implies two other points of the FP's definition of fundamentalism: "moral manicheism", and "elect, chosen membership"), millennialism is "a mechanism for the peoples of these societies to deal with profound socioeconomic change and as a channel for their reintegration into new forms of societal community".¹³ Particularly, millennialism can be a catalyst for political violence since it is associated with a feeling of moral outrage due to the tension arising when coping with alien cultural norms.

According to David Rapoport, messianic beliefs can lead to violence since the purpose of the terrorist "is to create a 'new consciousness' by methods which provoke extreme emotional reactions". Moreover, they are often associated with a sense of imminence, that makes believers to act, "to secure their own salvation". Violence is also a way to demonstrate the believer's faith, often through "a prominent act of desecration" against enemies.¹⁴

Mark Juergensmeyer highlights instead the moral manicheism of religious terrorists (involving "sharp boundaries" between them and their enemies), who – in contexts like the Palestinian conflict – perceive the situation as "a cosmic struggle of Manichaeian proportions [...] a combat between Good and Evil". A view which is "shared by religious activists on both sides".¹⁵ According to Juergensmeyer,

Looking closer at the notion of war, one is confronted with the idea of a dichotomous opposition on an absolute scale. It is not just a matter of differing opinions or an even contest against an opponent. [...] War suggests an all-or-nothing struggle against an enemy whom one is assumed to be determined to destroy. No compromise is deemed possible. The very existence of the opponent is a threat, and until the enemy is crushed or contained, one's own existence cannot be secure.¹⁶

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ David C. Rapoport, "Why Does Religious Messianism Produce Terror?", in Paul Wilkinson and Alasdair M. Stewart, *Contemporary Research on Terrorism*, Aberdeen University Press, Aberdeen 1987, pp. 72-88

¹⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, University of California, Berkeley/New York/London 2000, p. 153

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149

The religious terrorists' worldview appears thus as an extremization of Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy dichotomy, including war as "the existential negation of the enemy".¹⁷

Another feature of the fundamentalist groups also pointed out by several authoritative works about religious terrorism is the role of the charismatic leadership. According to Rinehart, the leader performs an essential role in shaping the politics of terror, with a role of "creator, communicator, and overseer of a radical, new political program, which is frequently inadequately defined and without bounds, but nevertheless grabs the attention of group members because it so effectively resonates with their expectations and aspirations". He must mediate the group stress and find solutions to circumstances, placing them in a meaningful context, and creating a more or less coherent ideology for the movement. He must provide the impression that he is the only person who understands "the causes of the present sources of stress and can provide salvation from it". Leaders, according to Rinehart, also perform another important function (also related to "inerrancy and absolutism"), with an operation of "selectivity" in the interpretation of sacred texts, from which they must successfully extract "those specific myths that are linked to the sacred icons of society: its legendary heroes, sufferings, and achievements".¹⁸

Someway, Rinehart's view of leadership is similar to Jessica Stern's definition of the "inspirational leader",¹⁹ "partly inspiring, partly commanding [...] he will aim to transform many of his followers into leaders. He will inspire

¹⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996

¹⁸ Rinehart, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-82

¹⁹ Both conceptions of leadership, for example, include an active role of followers, on whose needs the leader must shape the group's ideology, and whom the leader inspires only to take actions (also immoral ones) they already want to take.

some through appeals to spirit and emotion, but he will also provide tangible rewards, punishment, and coercion”.²⁰

Fundamentalist movements thus share several features with terrorist groups. However, again, this fact does not explain why and when a fundamentalist movement can give birth to a terrorist offspring. This paper suggests the hypothesis that – although every fundamentalist movement, at least in its extreme fringes, presents a natural predisposition to pursue its political aims through violence – the political opportunity structure and the movement’s relationship with the political establishment are crucial for the development and the growth of a terrorist group.

The theoretical framework of the political opportunity structure was first introduced in social sciences by Peter Eisinger in 1973, and has been developed by other scholars, such as Sydney Tarrow. This latter defines the political opportunity structure as “consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provides incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure”. According to Tarrow, this concept “helps us to understand why movements sometimes gain surprising, but temporary, leverage against elites or authorities and then quickly lose it despite their best efforts”.²¹

There are four significant dimensions that shape the political opportunity structure for a movement or a group. The first (according to Tocqueville’s well known thesis) is represented by the opening of an increasing access to power, which provides incentives to collective action. Another aspect of the political opportunity structure encouraging action is the instability of political alignments, namely electoral instability. A third, critical factor is the presence or absence of powerful political allies for militants; while the last is the

²⁰ Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, HarperCollins, New York 2003, pp. 144-145

²¹ Sydney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003

presence of divided elites (which not only encourages individuals to risk collective action, but also “encourages portions of the elite that are left out of power to seize the role of ‘tribunes of the people’”).²²

Besides these ‘changing’ aspects of the political opportunity structure, Tarrow also takes into account two other ‘stable’ aspects of it. The first one is the strength of the state, since weak and decentralized states can provide more sensible targets for mobilization and action. The other is the degree of repression operated by the state against the movement.²³ About this last factor, it is worthwhile to mention the theory proposed by Vincent Boudreau in his work about the repression (defined as “coercive acts or threats that weaken resistance to authorities’ will”) ²⁴ of democratic movements in Southeast Asia. According to this theory, it is not merely the strength of the repression which determines the opening of spaces for mobilization: it is also necessary to evaluate the ‘style’ of this repression. According to Boudreau, “for those compelled to live under a *specific* repressive regime, repression’s *form* may be as important as its *extent*”, mostly because “particular modes of state attack encourage specific patterns of political contention. Regime opponents anticipate state activity, search out its pattern, and in the light of that pattern, calibrate movement practice”.²⁵ For instance, states can severely crush peaceful demonstrations, while tolerating a violent underground (which often provides legitimacy to those who defend order); or the opposite. Moreover, in societies with a plurality of ethno-religious groups, authorities can repress some groups harder than others.

Moreover, the relationship between politics and fundamentalist movements can also be critical to give birth to violent groups when the bulk of

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 86-89

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-93

²⁴ Vincent Boudreau, *Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and Protest in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 2

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-13

the militants feels betrayed by governmental decisions and actions in a situation of threat or, at least, is convinced that the political establishment is not acting in the proper way or with sufficient resolution. This feeling can in fact drive some fringes to act by their own, adopting unlawful and, often, violent means.

Finally, as pointed out by Robert Pape in his study about suicide terrorism, in contexts marked out by conflict and religious difference, the consensus of the community can also play a significant role in legitimating the terrorist actions and “in encouraging individuals” to become terrorists. Pape remarks that this kind of situation can drive to action even non religious persons, who perceive the “other” as a threat to the survival of their community.²⁶

The following section, devoted to the analysis of three cases of domestic religious terrorism, will try to evaluate how the factors just described affect development, success and decay of groups devoted to political violence.

The Jewish Terrorism in Israel: The Macheret

In the previous pages, it was maintained that religious terrorists can carry out scandalous desecration acts, in order to prove their faith and change the progress of events. Perhaps, there is no more evident – and potentially disastrous – demonstration of this assumption, than the foiled plans of the Jewish clandestine group commonly known as *Macheret* or Jewish Underground. This group was an offspring of the Gush Emunim (“Bloc of the Faithful”), the main religious-nationalist organization among the Israeli settlers in the occupied territories. Although its existence was uncovered by the public only in 1984, it had been active since at least 1978 under the leadership of Yehuda Etzion and Yeshua Ben Shoshan. This evolution of the extreme part of

²⁶ Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Random House, New York 2005

the Jewish fundamentalist movement was mainly due to the anger and the despair after the Camp David peace agreement, signed by Prime Minister Menachem Begin and the Egyptian President Sadat. The treaty, sanctioning peace between Israel and Egypt, stated that occupied Sinai – where already lived many Israeli settlers – should be given back to Egypt. This provision created great distress among religious nationalists, mainly because it seemed to stop the march toward Redemption in the apocalyptic process they believed had begun with the Six Days War. Their ideology (as well as Gush Emunim's) was in fact shaped by rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook's ideas, which maintained that the Jewish conquest of all the territories belonging to the ancient Kingdom of Israel was the essential prerequisite to start the millennial process of Redemption.

As explained by Ehud Sprinzak, the Camp David Accords were, for these men, “a disaster of cosmic magnitude” that “could be explained only one way: God Himself had decided to interfere in the process of redemption – either because He was angry with His people or because He wanted to warn them of something”. According to their interpretation, the trouble God wanted to warn Israel about was “the existence of the ‘abomination’, the Muslim Dome of the Rock, on the Temple Mount”.²⁷ In 1978, at their first meeting, they thus decided to blow up the Dome of the Rock with explosives, although they would postpone this difficult task until 1984. In fact, many members of the group had some reservations about both the technical feasibility of the idea, and the possible consequences of this attack: the group therefore resolved to carry out the preparations for the attack, irrespectively of the ultimate operational decision.

In may 1980, however, the *Machteret* members were induced to act by a campaign of anti-Jewish violence that culminated in the assassination of six

²⁷ Ehud Sprinzak, *The Ascendance of Israel's Radical Right*, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford 1991, p. 94

religious students by Arab gunmen near Hebron. Convinced that terrorists were supported by the PLO, and tolerated by the Government, they decided that only a massive retaliation would get the situation back under control. They prepared another terrorist plan, called “mayors affair”, which provided for the assassination of five Arab leaders through car bombing. The attacks were mostly ineffective, but they were applauded by part of the Jewish population (although the perpetrators of the acts were then unknown to the public), and particularly by the settlers. Such sentiments were also mirrored by statements made by members of the Knesset, such as Haim Druckman (also a Gush Emunim member), who exclaimed: “Thus may all of Israel’s enemies perish!”.

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The major plan involving the destruction of the Dome of the Rock (providing for the involvement of at least 20 people, and the explosion of 28 precision bombs made out of explosives stolen from a military camp), which originally ought to take place no later than 1982, continued however to be kept in standby because of the lack of authoritative rabbinical approval: all the rabbis approached gave in fact equivocal responses. Meanwhile, in 1983 the group carried out an attack against a Muslim college, killing three people; in 1984, while the *Machteret* was going to get under way a much wider plan involving the simultaneous blowing up of five Arab buses, it was uncovered by the Israeli security service, and its members were arrested.

Investigations revealed that many members of the Gush Emunim had been involved in the group’s activities, or at least were informed about them: from its prominent ideologue rabbi Moshe Levinger (who was also jailed for some weeks), to the Knesset MP rabbi Eliezer Waldman (who had reportedly volunteered to participate in the attacks against Palestinian majors).

The group was able to gather, however, much wider public support after the capture of its members. This was largely due to the activity of the Gush

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97

Emunim which, although being on the defensive at the beginning (when even the main settlers' organizations condemned the activities of the *Machteret*, and several moderate members of the fundamentalist group distanced themselves from it), soon took an active stance, maintaining that the "good fellows" had committed repulsive acts only because of the wrong behavior of the Government, that had driven them to act that way.²⁹

The religious nationalist right launched a campaign aiming at the pardon for the *Machteret* members, lobbying the Government, staging demonstrations, sponsoring petitions and spreading their ideas through the media. The arrested militants, moreover, refusing to be treated as pariahs, started to write essays in order to communicate their worldview to the Israeli public. Their works, published on reviews like *Nekuda* and *Tzfia*, triggered a harsh debate among Israel's political and cultural elite.³⁰

In the following years (in which other Jewish terrorist groups, such as the Sikharim and Dikuy Bodgim, would be born) the ideas of the *Machteret* (if not its methods) gained consensus, with the creation of a Movement for the Reconstruction of the Temple, and the demand – made by dozens of authoritative rabbis – for the construction of a synagogue on the Temple Mount. Moreover, many Knesset MPs (including Likud leaders, such as Shamir and Sharon) came to support the campaign for the pardon. Twenty prisoners got back their freedom already in 1986, while the others were granted pardon in 1990 (welcomed outside the prison by dozens of settlers and called "heroes" by the spokesman of the Gush Emunim) by President Chaim Herzog,

²⁹ Similar statements were also made in 1994, after the mass murder of Arab civilians carried out by Baruch Goldstein at the Cave of the Patriarchs.

³⁰ Renzo Guolo, *Terra e redenzione. Il fondamentalismo nazional-religioso in Israele*, Guerini e Associati, Milano, 1997, pp. 87-89; see also Gideon Aran, "Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism: The Bloc of the Faithful In Israel (Gush Emunim)", in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991

claiming that they had expressed “unequivocal regret for their actions and renounced the path they took”.³¹

The Hindu terrorism and the destruction of the Babri Masjid

Another major act of desecration, this time successfully accomplished, was the destruction of the so-called *Babri Masjid*, and ancient mosque close to the city of Ayodhya, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The location of the building was traditionally believed by Hindus to be the birthplace of Lord Ram (*Ram Janmabhoomi*); there, according to some sources, in 1528 a Hindu temple had been destroyed by Emperor Babur to build the mosque. The issue of the mosque had already been raised by Hindu militants in 1949-50, but mobilization had then been stopped by the determination of the Government, led by Jawaharlal Nehru. The problem was brought up again in the 1980s, when the Indian political landscape had deeply changed, neglecting Nehru’s strict secularism. In fact, the religious nationalist movement had grown dramatically, mainly thanks to the efforts made by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – the main nationalist organization in India, with more than one million members³² – and its affiliated groups (collectively known as *Sangh Parivar*). Although the RSS had been founded in the 1920s as a mainly nationalist association (with a martial and paramilitary culture close to that of the European extreme right of that period), it had become in the following decades more and more religiously-oriented, especially after the creation in 1964 of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). This latter affiliated organization, which was meant to provide religious legitimacy to the *Sangh Parivar* through the direct involvement of *sadhus* (in a sort of Parliament of holy men), had

³¹ Menachem Friedman, *Zealots for Zion: Inside West Bank’s Settlement Movement*, Random House, New York 1992

³² Data of 1989, from Christophe Jaffrelot, “Introduction”, in Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *Sangh Parivar: A Reader*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 1-22

moreover given birth to a paramilitary group of religious extremists, named Bajrang Dal. The VHP raised the mosque issue for the first time in 1983, when a “Committee of sacrifice to liberate Ram’s birthplace” was created; in the following years, the issue was maintained both through mobilization and massive demonstrations, and through legal actions.³³ The activity of the movement was facilitated by the support of the RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had got 16 MPs in the 1980 elections and was going to defy the Congress in the 1990s for the national supremacy. Moreover, a pro-Hindu stance had also been taken by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the late 1970s and, in the 1980s, by her son and successor Rajiv: this new course had perceptibly decreased the strength of the repression against the Hindu extremists.³⁴

In the following years, tension and violence escalated, although the movement had obtained some minor results, such as the permission of performing Hindu religious ceremonies close to the mosque. The RSS and the VHP were, in this case, completely backed by the BJP, which – after the rise to power of Lal Krishna Advani after the 1984 elections – entered what Parvathy Appaiah has named “hindutva³⁵ Phase”.³⁶ Together, the organizations promoted (mainly through processions named *Ram Shila Pujans*) a wave of anti-Muslim riots which, from 1989, acquired a nationwide dimension, causing hundreds of victims. The *Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi* problem – thanks to the BJP efforts, but also to desperate attempts to find

³³ Harish Sharma, *Communal Angle in Indian Politics*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur/New Delhi, 2000, p. 104

³⁴ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics (1925 to the 1990s)*, Hurst & Co., London 1996

³⁵ The word *hindutva* was created in 1923, in the book *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, written by the Maharashtra brahman Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. This concept, inspiring later the RSS ideology, considers as Hindu all people looking at India as their motherland; being of Hindu breed; and belonging to the Hindu culture and civilization. Therefore, it includes among Hindus also Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs, but excludes Christians and Muslims.

³⁶ Parvathy Appaiah, *Hindutva: Ideology and Politics*, Deep & Deep, New Delhi 2003

legitimacy in religion made by Rajiv Gandhi – was among the main issues of the electoral campaigns of 1989 and 1991. The Ayodhya dispute also was the main reason for the fall of the Singh Government (which eventually led to the 1991 elections), when the BJP withdrew its support after Advani had been arrested during a protest march throughout India.³⁷

Between 1991 and 1992 the final mobilization about the Ayodhya issue took place, with thousands of militants gathering close to the *Babri Masjid*, and trying to build a Hindu temple. They were backed by the Uttar Pradesh Government (led by the BJP), which bought some land for that purpose; but they were stopped by the Supreme Court. At the end of November 1992, a much wider crowd of religious nationalist militants reached Ayodhya, where they were joined by many BJP leaders. The leadership of the party was, according to some sources, internally divided: while some extremists (such as Advani and Joshi) had reportedly already planned the destruction of the mosque, others (Vajpayee and Singh) were still probably trying to find a peaceful settlement. On December 6, a crowd of militants approached the mosque and started its demolition; when the structure collapsed, a temporary Hindu temple was constructed in the same place.³⁸

This event – which fuelled a new wave of riots among Hindus and Muslims with hundreds of deaths – was later depicted by the BJP official line as the result of the indiscipline of an angry mob; or, even, of the action of outsiders. Vajpayee declared in Parliament that he was “extremely sorry” (words repeated by other BJP leaders, such as Advani) and wanted the culprits punished, and that “the Ayodhya action was BJP worst miscalculation and a misadventure”; others, such as Uma Bharati, were more outspoken, acknowledging that day as “the most blissful” of their entire life; after some time, Kalyan Singh (who led the Uttar Pradesh local Government when the

³⁷ Jaffrelot, *op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 418-419

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 454-455

event happened) declared the destruction of the mosque an act of God and a “revolution day”, in which the foundation of a new India had been laid. Generally, none of the party leaders was apparently willing to openly criticize the destruction of the *Babri Masjid*.³⁹ Moreover, it was proved that most militants active in Ayodhya were affiliated to the main organizations of the movement: RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal, Durga Vahini and Shiv Sena. About the premeditation of the act, Jaffrelot argues that “many clues suggest that the demolition had been the result of careful preparation”: for example, the team which demolished the mosque wore peculiar headbands, and was equipped with proper tools. Therefore, the demolition of the mosque (as recognized also by a tribunal) was not the spontaneous outburst of an angry mob, but a terrorist operation carefully planned by at least some of the movement’s leaders.⁴⁰

The event brought temporary disgrace on the movement, whose main organizations were immediately banned by the Government, and whose leaders active in Ayodhya were arrested. However, the crackdown was soon relaxed by the weak Rao Government: the main politicians arrested were freed only four days later, and the bans on the organizations were lifted after some months. Although the Government immediately declared that the mosque would have been rebuilt, along with a Hindu temple nearby, nothing has been done yet (although Hindu militants have several times tried to start building the temple). The trials involving BJP’s and other group’s leaders are still in progress, among many difficulties.

The Islamic terrorism in Turkey: Hezbollah

In the 1980s, when the terrorist group known as Turkish Hezbollah was presumably formed, Turkey was experiencing one of the most troubled

³⁹ Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 136; A.G. Noorani, *The Rss and the BJP: A Division of Labour*, LeftWord Books, New Delhi 2001 [1st ed. 2000], p. 77

⁴⁰ Jaffrelot, *op. cit.*, 1996, p. 455-457

moments of its republican history. After a decade of increased conflict between the extreme right and the extreme left – in a context marked by a deep economic and political crisis – the military had staged a coup, officially to restore order. Both the Government and the Parliament were dissolved and all political parties were banned; 650.000 people were arrested and 50 executed, while hundreds died or disappeared in unclear circumstances.⁴¹ The military regime led by General Kenan Evren (who also became President of the Republic in 1982), ruling the country between 1980 and 1983, decided to adopt a neutralized version of Islam (the so-called “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis”) as the new bonding agent for the nation. This paved the way for Turgut Özal, a moderate pro-Islamic politician, to become Prime Minister. In the Country was also active in these years the more extremist Refah Parti, led by Necmettin Erbakan, which briefly got to power in the mid-90s. Even among the extreme right militants (the Grey Wolves organization led by Alparslan Türkeş) some converted to Islam, adopting a religious-nationalist ideology. The political Islam was thus legitimated – probably beyond the intentions of the military – in an unprecedented way.⁴²

During that decade also began a new, harsh phase of Kurdish insurgency, which not only brought about dozens of victims, but also increased the already impressive migratory wave from the South-East. It was in those regions, within the particular historical context just described, that Hezbollah was created. Its origins are indeed not clear, but it seems to be related to the Kurdish Islamic movement of the early 1980s; while it had no proved connections to the best known homonymous Lebanese organization, the group probably received a limited Iranian support. Its militants were generally coming from poor families with a low level of education, living in the rural region around Diyarbakir.

⁴¹ Levent Ünsaldi, *Le Militaire et la Politique en Turquie*, L’Harmattan, Paris 2005

⁴² Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, Oxford University Press, New York 2003; Cizre Sakallıoğlu, Ümit, “Parameters and Strategies of Islam-State Interaction in Republican Turkey”, *Internazional Journal of Middle East Studies*, n. 28, 1996, pp. 231-251

Hezbollah's militants appeared publicly for the first time in 1984 proclaiming their support to the Iranian revolution and to "Allah's way"; in 1987 they produced a document entitled "The guidelines of the Islamic Movement", which included the acceptance of the Islamic State as the center of religious belief, the leadership of Muslim scholars, the spread of the mentality of martyrdom and the leadership of the Iranian Islamic revolution.⁴³ Its organization, come to light only after years of investigation, was rather similar to a cult, and therefore very difficult to infiltrate for security agencies. Every militant (not unlike an intelligence agent) had a code name, several identities, and a strict adherence to secrecy; if any member was suspected of revealing secrets, he was punished severely.⁴⁴ At the beginning, Turkish Hezbollah – led by Huseyin Velioğlu – focused its attacks on the PKK and the Marxist Kurdish separatists.

Some observers believe or suspect that Turkish Hezbollah was covertly backed by the Turkish security apparatus and used as the Government's pawn against the Kurdish separatists represented by the PKK (which in the 1980s were regarded as the most dangerous enemy of the Turkish state). Or, at least, that among the Turkish security, bureaucracy and authorities had emerged a faction determined to save the integrity of Turkey with all means available, including the tolerance of terrorist activities. In the mid-1990s was also made public the evidence that Hezbollah had been equipped with weapons secretly imported by the Governor of Batman.⁴⁵ As we will see later, moreover, the serious crackdown on the organization began only after the truce between Hezbollah and PKK and the capture of the Kurdish leader Öcalan, when the

⁴³ Ely Karmon, "Radical Islamic Political Groups in Turkey", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 1, n. 4, 1997

⁴⁴ John T. Nugent, jr., "The Defeat of Turkish Hizballah as a Model for Counter-Terrorism Strategy", *Middle East Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 8, n. 1, 2004

⁴⁵ Olga Levitsky, "In the Spotlight: Turkish Hezbollah", Center for Defense Information, 2003, http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=1928&from_page=../index.cfm (august 10, 2007); Asli Aydintaşbaş, "Murder on the Bosphorus", vol. VII, n. 2, 2000

Islamic group was no longer useful as a tool, and the Kurdish separatist threat appeared to be reduced. On the other side, some scholars believe that the counter-terrorism operations carried out against Hezbollah in the 1990s were not very effective because of the secrecy surrounding the organization; and that the crackdown of 1999-2001 was due to the increased intelligence resources freed after the ceasefire declared by the PKK.⁴⁶

Whatever the reality about the involvement of state agencies, until the mid-1990s Turkish Hezbollah was able to act virtually undisturbed. Apparently both the public opinion and the Turkish authorities became aware of the existence of the terrorist group only in 1993, after the assassination of the well known journalist Uğur Mumcu.⁴⁷

Between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the group spread throughout Turkey, using mosques and religious bookstores to promote its ideas and recruit new members. Although Hezbollah claimed to be logistically and financially supported by Kurdish businessmen, it was more likely through blackmail and kidnapping that it obtained its major revenues.⁴⁸ While expanding, the terrorist network also split in two factions, named *Ilimciler* and *Menzilciler*: the first of them advocated the use of violence to achieve the purposes of the movement; while the latter was more moderate, preferred more peaceful means, and focused on education. The struggle between these two factions also caused hundreds of victims. In the mid-1990s, the *Ilimciler* spread into the main western Turkish cities, attacking not only PKK politicians and militants as in the past, but also non Kurdish people such as left intellectuals and journalists, and institutions that the group considered anti-Islamic, such as brothels, liquor sellers, and progressive organizations,

⁴⁶ Nugent jr., *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Karmon, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Levitsky, *op. cit.*

through assassination, kidnapping, beating; they also carried out attacks with acid against women not dressed in an orthodox Islamic manner.⁴⁹

The group was evidently changing its strategy, and was more interested in its activities in the western cities (where in the meantime the Islamist Refah Parti had developed an impressive and pervasive organization, which allowed Erbakan's party to win the 1994 local elections, and later the 1995 political ones). Hezbollah became thus less prone to attack PKK militants and (according to intelligence reports revealed by the newspaper *Milliyet*) signed in 1998 a 'peace treaty' with the group of Öcalan, ending clashes between the two organizations.⁵⁰

As pointed out before, scholars dealing with Turkish Hezbollah disagree about the interpretation of the events: some think that the truce with the PKK was the reason driving the Turkish security apparatus to become hostile to Hezbollah; some others believe that the crackdown on the organization was due to a new availability of resources; moreover, it must be remembered that, after the disastrous experience of the Erbakan Government – which was deposed by the Army through non-violent means, allegedly because of its pro-Islamic stances and policies – the kemalist establishment had become more aware of the fundamentalist menace, which now topped its agenda. Whatever the reason, the intelligence seriously started to gather information about the terrorist group between 1997 and 1998; between 1999 and 2000, the security forces launched large operations which led to the arrest of dozens of militants, while Hezbollah's leader Velioğlu was killed during an exchange of shots with the Police. The discovery of new documents also led to find the graves of several victims, tortured and buried in safe places by the terrorists. Up to 2.000 people were arrested in the following months.

⁴⁹ Sedat Laciner, "Combat against Religionist Terrorism in Turkey: Al Qaeda and Turkish Hezbollah Cases", *Turkish Weekly*, april 2007, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/articles.php?id=178> (august 10, 2007)

⁵⁰ Nugent, jr., *op. cit.*

Although, after this harsh repression, the group has apparently ceased its activities, doubts still remain about the involvement of some state agencies in its crimes (also because the issue has been instrumentally raised both by the Islamist leader Erbakan and by Kurdish representatives). These speculations even led the Army, and President Demirel – just in the middle of the massive operations launched against Hezbollah in 2000, when the atrocities committed by the group were made public – to officially deny the state’s involvement, adding “If such crimes are committed using the state's forces, then those responsible will not escape punishment”.⁵¹

Concluding Remarks

The three cases just examined are very different from each other, particularly when examining the groups’ purposes, scope, and membership. However, it is evident that all the organizations just described benefited of propitious political opportunity structures, which allowed them to carry out terrorist attacks almost undisturbed, at least in some times and circumstances.

First of all, the events described took place in contexts marked by political instability and shifts in political alignments. In India, the long era of the Congress rule was coming to an end: indeed, after two years of unstable governments, the Congress Party had won the 1991 elections only thanks to the emotional wave generated by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi; the Government in charge afterwards was consequently particularly weak. Similarly, in the Israeli case, the 1977 elections had brought an end to the Labor supremacy; a new political elite was then trying to conquer the positions of power, while the harsh debate about the retreat from Sinai divided the public opinion and the political establishment. In Turkey, the wave of instability and

⁵¹“Turkish Army Denies Hezbollah Links, *BBC News*, 24 January 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/616704.stm>; “Turkish Hezbollah: 'No state links'”, 23 January 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/615785.stm> (August 10, 2007)

conflict of the 1970s had been stopped only by the intervention of the Army, with the 1980 coup, followed by three years of military rule and the suppression of the existing political parties.

Only in the Indian case connections between militants and prominent politicians (BJP leaders such as Advani, Joshi and Singh) are evident; in Israel, the terrorists of the *Machteret* were only openly connected to some MPs affiliated or close to the Gush Emunim and other extra-parliamentary leaders of the Jewish fundamentalist movement; while in Turkey Hezbollah's connections with the political world can only be suspected.

However, in all three cases, the national political culture was rapidly changing, increasing the opportunities of access to power for the religious right activists. In India, not only the *Sangh Parivar*-affiliated BJP was gaining consensus but the fundamentalist positions had also been legitimated by the pro-religious shift of Rajiv Gandhi. In Israel, while Menachem Begin had conquered power with the open support of the fundamentalist Jewish groups, the activity of the Gush Emunim and Kach activists were increasingly giving voice to the demand for a tougher position against Arabs. In Turkey, although the strict secularism of the kemalist ideology had not been countered, the military regime had adopted a moderate and non political Islamic ideology (the so-called Turkish-Islamic Synthesis) as a way to mitigate the fractures of the political and social systems. Moreover, in 1983 a moderate pro-Islamic politician, Turgut Özal, won the new elections, while the following decade saw the steady growth of the more extremist Welfare Party (RP).

These political events also had consequences on the style of repression carried out by the authorities and the security agencies. In Israel, there is no doubt that repression was mainly directed against Islamic groups; while, as was explained, the idea of a Jewish terrorist movement was regarded as hardly conceivable. Although in India the nehruvian secular stance had always evenly repressed all religious extremisms, from the 1980s, after the Hindu

‘conversion’ of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, things had slightly changed: in fact, the security forces appeared less motivated to act against Hindu extremists than they had been in the previous decades. In Turkey, while religious extremism was even more hindered by the regime, there is no doubt that the top security priority, at least in the 1980s and the early 1990s, was to curb the threat of the Kurdish insurgency.

Especially in the first two cases, the emergence of religious terrorist movements can also be connected to the dissatisfaction about the actions of the political elite, and also of the leadership of the fundamentalist movement itself, which many militants asked for a more resolute stance against the ‘threatening others’. In Israel, militants of the nationalist religious right felt betrayed and desperate when Begin (whom they believed would fulfill the dream of the reconstitution of the Kingdom of Israel) signed the Camp David Accords, consenting to give Sinai back to Egypt. In India, militants were dissatisfied both about the behavior of the Congress politicians (who had to keep an eye also on their Muslim constituency), and about the moderate stance taken by the BJP leadership in the early 1980s. In these cases can also be verified a surprising degree of community consensus, not only among religious fundamentalists, but also in significant segments of the mainstream right, which allowed terrorists to partly legitimate their ideas (if not their actions) and to go virtually free from punishment.

This paper cannot (and does not aim to) provide an ultimate answer to the questions related to the emergence and the development of religious terrorist movements. However, it tried to provide an insight into the political implications of the phenomenon. Although no direct connection between mainstream politics and religious terrorism has yet been officially proved in the cases here analyzed, there are good reasons to think that politics can play a major role in facilitating the development of groups devoted to religious violence. Sometimes, politicians intentionally encourage religious extremism

and violence to achieve their own purposes; in most other cases, they simply legitimate the extremists' positions by taking softer stances on the issues they propose; in some cases, they even indirectly cause religious violence by adopting policies that a religious community feels as betrayal.

In any case, this paper argues that the subject – just sketched in these pages – deserves more attention and investigations, not only as a mean to better understand the phenomenon of domestic religious terrorism, but also to comprehend some possible implications of the current wave of international terrorism.