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Błażej Bado

Secular and religious terrorist groups according to Yonah Alexander

Abstract

Having analysed Yonah Alexander's texts and statements the author presents his narration about terrorism, making a distinction between terrorism inspired by secular ideas and religiously motivated terrorism. In his opinion the first group includes: Al-Fatah, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, while the other: Hamas and Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine. Following the through of Yonah Alexander the author shows the synthesis of his scholarly and journalistic accomplishments, including those concerning terrorism. This article is a contribution to the research in the area of contemporary national and international security studies in individual countries.

Key words: Yonah Alexander, secular terrorism, religious terrorism, security

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Introduction

this article is aimed at presenting main directions of Yonah Alexander's studies on terrorism, in particular terrorist groups operating in the Middle East. The work offers an analysis and synthesis of the researcher's texts. The selection of sources – authors and texts – has been determined, first, by the headline target: depicting a multifaceted reflection on creating security at the same time confronting it with the threats brought about by terrorism. Secondly, referring to the accomplishments of one of the greatest scholars dealing with the heritage of terrorism – Yonah Alexander.¹ Thirdly, presenting internal thematic linkages in the studies on security, secular terrorism and religious terrorism. The texts and views that has been quoted and discussed – primarily those by Yonah Alexander, but also other researchers – have been selected from the viewpoint of their relation with the securitological and semantic problem area investigated in this article. It is made up of an introduction, an outline of the problem, two analytical

¹ Yonah Alexander (b. 1931) – a researcher of terrorism of international renown, author of many publications in this area. From among many of his numerous functions worth mentioning are the following: Member of the Board of Regents, Senior Fellow, and Director of International Center for Terrorism Studies at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Director of the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies and Director of the Inter-University Center for Legal Studies (in Washington, D.C.). Both academic institutions are consortia of universities and think tanks throughout the world. Previously, Dr. Alexander served as Professor of International Affairs and Director of Terrorism Studies at the George Washington University as well as Professor of International Studies and Director of the Institute for Studies in International Terrorism at the State University of New York system. Cf. *Professor Yonah Alexander, Ph.D.*

chapters and a closing, which sums up the basic assumptions and the formulated conclusions.

1. Issues

Terrorism is without doubt one of the main problems relating to the shaping of security of the contemporary world. The characteristics of terrorist acts include primarily: considerable spectacularity, unpredictability and multifaceted impact on the functioning of societies and governments. Despite its popularity and long-time efforts at systematising and qualifying it, the term has never been captured in a single universal definition which would be binding for the international community. The obstacle hindering the road to working out a uniform and precise definition is a result of: political reasons, cultural and ideological issues, interests of various individual and collective entities.² Because of such a broad spectrum of terrorism, the article presents only selected views concerning the area on hand.

One of the most popular definitions which is universally used by scientists and researchers dealing with terrorism has been worked out at the US Department of Defense. It defines terrorism as premeditated acts involving politically motivated violence, targeted at civilians and committed by groups of a regional reach or secret state agencies, usually intended to impact the population.³ A similar view was expressed by Bartosz Bolechów, who defines terrorism as a form of political violence consisting in using murders or destruction (or threatening to use them) in order to cause shock and extreme

² Cf. Bolechów (2002): 33.

³ Cf. Holms, Burke (2001): 20.

intimidation of individuals, social groups or governments, aimed at forcing out desired political concessions, provoking inconsiderate actions and/or demonstrating/promoting one's own political convictions.⁴ In contrast, this phenomenon is totally differently perceived in Russia. Terrorism is interpreted there as a threat to use violence targeted at organisations or people, destruction of certain material assets and various facilities and sites, which may result in the death of citizens. It involves a threat of a serious damage to property or inciting other socially important consequences aimed at disturbing social peace, intimidating the population or influencing various decision-making processes, so that they conform to the expectations of terrorists.⁵ This is merely part of the activities that may be regarded as acts of terrorism under Russian law. A broad terminological perspective in a way ensures greater freedom in interpreting the phenomena which may be classified as acts of terrorism. In turn, Yonah Alexander⁶, who has researched terrorism for many years, presents his view as follows:

Terrorism – the calculated employment of violence, or the threat of violence by individuals, subnational groups, and state actors to attain political, social, and economic objectives in the violation of law, intended to create an overwhelming fear in a target area larger than the victims attacked or threatened.⁷

⁴ Cf. Bolechów (2002): 35.

⁵ Cf. Nowakowska-Krystman, Zubrzycki, Daniluk, Mazur-Cieślik (2015): 62.

⁶ Cf. Alexander (2015): 335; *Professor Yonah Alexander, Ph.D.*

⁷ Alexander (2002).

The essence of those actions should be seen in its effectiveness aimed at paralysing the functioning of major bodies responsible for making key decisions on issues connected with security, which is confirmed by Cezary Smuniewski's statement of a popular character:

Terrorist attacks are aimed at intimidating society. There are various measures for the «effectiveness» of terrorism. I believe that terrorism is effective when it paralyses societies, deprives them for a long time of the ability to think critically, hold them captive in fear, frustrating their hope and creative reflection. The «effectiveness» of terrorism must not be measured by the number of victims or the amounts of money allocated for countering the attacks. «Effective» terrorism is tantamount to hopeless fear which debilitates the reasoning ability of a political community.⁸

Summing up, terrorism is a dynamic phenomenon, permanently evolving, which so far has not been specified in a single universal definition. The terminological problem is connected, first of all, with the diversity of classification of acts of violence as terrorist events in the legal systems of individual states. Therefore, we are faced with a diverse and imprecise nomenclature of this phenomenon. Despite a multitude of definitions, we are able to discern some common features repeated in almost all publicly available definitions. First of all it concerns violence which is employed by those who want to influence the decisions (decision-making processes), in most cases of a political nature, a result of which is omnipresent fear and terror.

⁸ Smuniewski (2017): 12.

2. Secular groups

2.1. Al-Fatah

Fatah was founded in 1958 by Yasser Arafat, Salah Khaleb and Khalid al-Wazir when they were university students in Cairo. As stated by Yonah Alexander, Fatah is a secular nationalist Palestinian movement organised in order to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation. Fatah's ideology is based on two main events. Yonah Alexander believes that the first one was the victory of the National Liberation Front⁹ over French colonialism in Algeria, which for the analysed group is an example of successful armed struggle, whereas the other one is associated with the texts written by Franz Fanon.¹⁰ Those influenced shaped the position of Fatah as regards legitimisation of armed struggle as an inseparable element that could unify the Palestinian nation.¹¹

According to the interpretation of Yonah Alexander's texts Fatah regards Palestine as part of the Arab world inhabited by the Palestinian nation, which has its inalienable identity, can decide its own fate, and therefore sovereign. The struggle carried out by the Palestinians plays a gigantic role in the liberation of Palestine and is an integral element of international fight against colonialism, Zionism,¹² and imperialism. The liberation of Palestine is considered the main target

⁹ National Liberation Front – an Algerian political organisation heading the armed national liberation revolt in the years 1954–1962. Cf. Alexander, Keiger (2012).

¹⁰ Franz Fanon – was an anti-colonialist revolutionary writer living in Algeria administered by the French in the mid-20th century. Cf. Zeilig (2016); Hudis (2015).

¹¹ Cf. Alexander (2003): 1.

¹² More on Zionism cf. Schwartz (2009); Rotenstreich (2007).

of the organization and treated as a national obligation, that is why any and all treaties or resolutions adopted by the UN or other similar organisations, which evidently undermine the rights of the Palestinian nation, are in the light of Fatah's convictions unlawful. The Zionist movement is identified with aggression in its ideology, methods and goals, and that is why Israeli presence in Palestine is an invasion comparable to colonisation.¹³ According to Yonah Alexander the main targets of Fatah are as follows:

- Complete liberation of Palestine and eradication of Zionist economic, political, military and cultural existence,
- Establishing an independent democratic state with complete sovereignty on all Palestinian lands, and Jerusalem is its capital city, and protecting the citizens' legal and equal rights without any racial or religious discrimination,
- Setting up a progressive society that warrants people's rights and their public freedom,
- Active participation in achieving the Arab Nation's goals in liberation and building an independent, progressive and united Arab society,
- Backing up all oppressed people in their struggle for liberation and self-determination in order to build a just, international peace.¹⁴

The manner in which Fatah strives to the implementation of the above postulates is based on staging terrorist attacks directed at both military targets and the civilian population. Yonah Alexander lists here, first of all, attacks with bombs,

¹³ Cf. Alexander (2003): 5–6.

¹⁴ Ibidem: 6.

mortars, grenades or firearms. The organisation operates primarily in the areas of the Gaza Strip, Israel and the West Bank.¹⁵

2.2. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

In the light of Yonah Alexander's texts the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine is a group which arose in the wake of the six-day war¹⁶ in 1967. Its founder was George Habash, an Arab of Christian denomination, who by having united three independent groups, namely: the Heroes of the Return, the National Front for Liberation of Palestine, and the Independent Palestine Liberation Front, initiated one of the groups affiliating in its ranks Palestinian Arabs, which at the time were distinguished by their influences.¹⁷

According to Yonah Alexander, the concept underlying the operation of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine rested on three pillars: Palestinian uniqueness (*wataniyya*), Arab unity (*qawmiyya*), and Marxism-Leninism. This group regards the Palestinian population as a separate Arab nation which is entitled to its own autonomous territory, which is to become a sovereign state. It should be noted that this state is to be based on Marxist-Leninist principles.¹⁸ Yonah Alexander rightly seeks ideological similarities of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to the revolutionary partisan teachings of Fidel Castro.¹⁹ Those similarities become evident when it is noted that the aim of the Popular Front for

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibidem*: 24–26.

¹⁶ More on the six-day war cf. Louis, Shlaim (2012).

¹⁷ Cf. Alexander (2003): 33.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Cf. Alexander, Sinai (1989): 40.

the Liberation of Palestine is to liberate entire Palestine from the Zionist thinking, which in its arguments invokes religious (biblical) factors. In practice this means carrying out such policy which will utilise all possible means to neutralise the state of Israel basing primarily on terrorist attacks. Moreover, Yonah Alexander points out that the group does not envisage any negotiations with the government of the state of Israel, thus maintaining an uncompromising position.²⁰ It should be noted that the development of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was directly supported by the Soviet Union. Following its collapse, Marxist-Leninist slogans were replaced by democratic-socialist ones²¹, which read as follows:

1. Liberation from Israeli occupation.
2. Construction of a democratic society.
3. Recognition that the Palestinian people are an integral part of the Arab Nation.
4. Recognition that the Palestinian struggle is part of the international, democratic struggle towards liberation, progress, democracy, and social justice.²²

As noted by Yonah Alexander, the operating area of the group covers Israel, Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, Left Bank of the Jordan, and Europe. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine sees the implementation of its political goals in the civilian population and the military, at the same time staging attacks with the use of firearms and grenades. Already in the 1970s the group acquired international renown for its ruthlessness and brutality.²³

²⁰ Cf. Alexander (2003): 33.

²¹ Cf. Ibidem: 35.

²² Ibidem: 36.

²³ Cf. Ibidem: 38.

2.3. Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine is a Marxist-Leninist group established as a result of separation from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in 1969, the initiator of which was Nayef Hawatmeh. According to Yonah Alexander, the ideology of the group is focused around the following statements:

- The Palestinian national goal cannot be achieved without a revolution of the working class,
- Revolutionary change in the Arab world, especially in the conservative monarchies, is a necessary precursor to the achievement of Palestinian objectives,
- An international stance must be taken that places the Palestinian struggle within a general world context of liberation in the postcolonial world,
- Elite members of the movement should not be separated from the masses. Lower classes should be educated in true socialism in order to carry out the battle of liberation,
- There must be “hostility and resistance” to U.S. policy in the Middle East, its support for the nonaligned bloc, and its solidarity with all national liberation movement that fight against “imperialism” and “racism”,
- The situation in the Middle East must be upgraded to an armed conflict against Israeli soldiers and civilians in the Disputed Territories.²⁴

The organisation sees the state of Israel as its greatest enemy, which they believe is characterised by imperialist and racist inclinations. Yonah Alexander claims that the initial

²⁴ Ibidem: 46.

views of the people affiliated with the democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine evidenced that they tended to create a common state for the Arabs and the Jews. However, with time those convictions were evolving. Eventually they arrived at an unequivocal position that an Arab state can be established exclusively on the land liberated from Israel. The operations of the group were concentrated in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Yonah Alexander states that they consist mostly in bomb attacks, abductions for negotiations and assaults with the use of firearms.²⁵

2.4. Conclusions

In the above chapter selected terrorist groups described in his texts by Yonah Alexander have been presented. The headline target put forth by each of the above mentioned groups is based on neutralising the state of Israel and the Zionist movement, as they constitute the main obstacle to further existence of the Palestinian people. In the opinion of the groups that have been analysed above Israel is cast in the role of the oppressor of the Palestinian people, characterised by imperialist and racist tendencies. The analysed organisations engage in terrorist activities motivated by the desire to create one's own sovereign and autonomous state, which can responsibly represent the Arab position on the international arena. Yonah Alexander categorically excludes religious motivations in the described groups, thus underlining closeness of some of them to the Marxist-Leninist system. The ideology of those groups combines nationalistic and national liberation tendencies.

²⁵ Cf. Ibidem: 48.

3. Religious groups

3.1. Hamas

According to the sources drawn from Yonah Alexander's publications, Hamas was officially established in 1988, soon after the outbreak of the first Palestinian Intifada,²⁶ by member of the Muslim Brotherhood,²⁷ who decided to add a military component to their organisation. Active military operations against the state of Israel and the Zionist movement are considered the fundamental *raison d'être* of the group. Hamas owes a lot of its success to its impact in the Gaza Strip. Yonah Alexander claims that social and economic problems of the refugees in Gaza as well as the fact that other nationalistic parties were not dominant at that time made it possible for Hamas to gain widespread support. Thus the organisation managed to create a social system alternative to the Palestine Liberation Organisation.²⁸ In August 1988, Hamas disseminated its ideological doctrine called the Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement. It reads, first of all, that only Hamas is the sole legal representative of the Palestinian people, and moreover that it opposes not only Israel but also the Palestine Liberation Organisation.²⁹

Hamas' ideology is based primarily on the main current of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Bann in Egypt. It combines both religious principles and pan-Arabic ideas, as well as Palestinian national

²⁶ More on the Intifada cf. Aronson (1990).

²⁷ More on the Muslim Brotherhood cf. Wąs (2006).

²⁸ More on the Palestine Liberation Organisation cf. Cobban (1984); Becker (1984).

²⁹ Cf. Alexander (2002): 1.

aspirations. Hamas enriched Palestinian nationalism with religious beliefs – Islam. In this manner it led to a confrontation between the secular national ideology of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Islamic nationalistic programme. In the Covenant, published by Hamas in 1988, its authors described themselves as the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. They made it the main aim of Hamas to establish an Islamic state in all Palestinian countries, including Israel. They state that the Holy War is the only method to redeem entire Palestine, whereas it is a duty of all Muslims to take part. Not irrelevant is also the fact that since its establishment Hamas has been striving at setting up a civic religious structure to deal with such issues as help to the poor, education, religion and health.³⁰

Yonah Alexander believes that the primary aim of the organisation is to annihilate the state of Israel. He notes that Hamas presents itself as an organisation that has a potential to contribute directly to halting the conflict. However, the path to this aim leads inescapably through an open ultimate struggle. The ideological assumptions of Hamas are evidently not underlain by the desire to end the conflict peacefully, and moreover any concessions which would be aimed at leaving even a smallest scarp of land to Israel are considered as a betrayal of the Palestinian and Arabic cause. This stance was initiated by the events arising directly from the second Intifada,³¹ after which Hamas additionally doubled its strength calling all Palestinians to continue the struggle with all means any time and in any place.³²

³⁰ Cf. Ibidem: 3.

³¹ More on the second Intifada cf. Bregman (2010).

³² Cf. Alexander (2002): 3.

3.2. Palestinian Islamic Jihad

The organisation was established in 1979–1980, spurred by the revolution in Iran,³³ and also in the context of anxiety caused by the Muslim Brotherhood's neglect of the Palestinian issue, i.e. the striving to establish an autonomous Palestinian state. An alternative ideology was put forward, which became the foundation for a new organisation. Having made in-depth studies Yonah Alexander arrives at a conclusion that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad does not aspire to unify the Islamic world as this is not a *sine qua non* condition for the liberation of Palestine, whereas the very freeing of Palestine from Zionist influences will be a key to the unification of the Islamic world. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad maintains that the jihad³⁴ applied by Islamic groups will liberate Palestine and shall reconstruct an even greater and united Islamic states.³⁵ For Yonah Alexander it is important that the founders of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad had close relations with radical Islamic groups of Egyptian students, some of whom were involved in the coup against the President of Egypt, Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat, who was in power in the years 1970–1981.³⁶ As a result the Palestinian radicals were expelled from Egypt and established the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip.³⁷

The annihilation of the state of Israel with the use of violence is the topmost objective of existence of the Palestinian

³³ More on the revolution in Iran cf. Bayandor (2019).

³⁴ More on the jihad cf. Cook (2005).

³⁵ Cf. Alexander (2003): 29.

³⁶ More on Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat cf. Al-Sadat (1979); Waterbury (1983).

³⁷ Cf. Alexander (2002): 29–30.

Islamic Jihad. Moreover, another of the aims of the organisation is to topple those Arab government which do not live in compliance with Islamic laws. The activists of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad sharply criticised the Palestine Liberation Organisation for its active part in creating the peace process with Israel. That process was perceived by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad as incompatible with the desire to establish a Palestinian state. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad is one of the most influential terrorist groups which accepted the ideology of Islamic Jihad perceiving Israel as the fundamental enemy of the Muslims.

That is why members of the organisation call for Islamic armed struggle to liberate all of Palestine. The main tactic is the use of guerrilla groups led by the revolutionary avant-garde. In turn, its main task is to carry out terrorist attacks gradually weakening the position of the state of Israel. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad focuses primarily on attacks with the use of firearms, cold weapons, bombs and psychological manipulations aimed at challenging people to use violence and stage suicide attacks. Targets are usually Israeli soldiers and civilians, as well as Palestinians collaborators. Traditionally, they try to attack Israeli targets on the anniversary of the killing of their leader, Fathi Shaqaqi (d. 26 October 1995). Members of this organisation perceive themselves as those who have created the foundations for the Islamic army, and in the future will be able to defeat Israel in direct military confrontation.³⁸

³⁸ Cf. Alexander (2002): 29, 36.

3.3. Conclusions

The above chapter presents selected terrorist groups inspired by religious ideas. The cause for the existence of these groups, like in the case of secular groups, is to destroy the state of Israel and the Zionist movement by all available means, thus giving the key place to actions of the terrorist nature. According to their basic assumptions those organisations focus on the unification of the Arab people within an Islamic state. They emphasise that unification will be possible only and exclusively thanks to jihad, which will liberate Palestine from the oppressor, which according to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad is Israel. Islam is the core of the functioning of those groups, an example of which is no tolerance for those Arab government which are not correlated with the religion they adhere to. What is more, those organisations aim at creating a civic and religious structure which would in compliance with the law interfere into people's lives and at the same time make other state sectors dependent on its unlimited powers. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas are among the most radical and brutal organisation operating in the Palestinian territory, which try to expand their influence and legitimise their actions with their impeccable religiousness and devotion of the Palestinian cause.

Conclusion

Terrorist organisations presented in Yonah Alexander's publication are divided into religious and secular ones. The area of their operation is limited primarily to the Middle East, Israel being its central point. The main purpose for the functioning of the analysed groups is to destroy the state of Israel

and the Zionist movement by all available means. Their tactic is focused on staging terrorist attacks aimed at weakening the enemy state, which in their eyes is the oppressor of the Palestinian people. An equally live topic characteristic of the described groups is also the desire to establish an autonomous Arab state. Despite coincident objectives, both groups have completely different views as regards the foundations of such state. Religious groups – Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad – are for the state based on the Islamic principles, whereas secular groups – Al-Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine – adhere to leftist ideas. This may be considered as the greater difference between those groups, which in the future may bring about an additional conflict arising from the intolerance of religious groups of the leadership of the Arab state of people who do not adhere to Islam. An additional threat may be the unpredictable possible future development of Marxist-Leninist ideas.

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