The Framing of (Counter) State Violence: Challenging the rhetoric of non-State actors, political violence & ‘terrorism’

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I. The Gaza Strip & Nablus: A Tale of Two City-states

The labeling of violence as either legitimate or illegitimate is more an act of Statecraft than a values-based examination of the incident itself. This is a central thesis I teach my students, it formulates the basis of my writing, and is a recurrent trend throughout this issue of Affinities. To begin making this point, let us examine a blog post distributed 30 August 2013, by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), an armed force that has taken the lead in the use of social networks to craft a conflict narrative for an international audience:

Terrorist Attack in the Southern Gaza Strip
by Israel Defense Forces

An explosive device was detonated a short time ago near an IDF routine patrol adjacent to the security fence in the Southern Gaza Strip. No injuries were reported. Lieutenant Colonel Peter Lerner, IDF spokesperson to the international press said in a statement: “This terrorist action originating in the immediate rural areas bordering Israel is of grave concern. The IDF will continue to operate in order to exercise its freedom of operational access in order to prevent such attacks against its forces and the civilians of the State of Israel.”

To summarize the events: An armed Palestinian organization detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) targeting an Israeli military vehicle on patrol. The attackers used traditional methods—a remotely detonated bomb—directed at armed, uniformed and active-duty military personnel. These Israeli soldiers were operating in service of the continued military enclosure of the Gaza Strip, deemed to be Palestinian-controlled territory since September 2005. The IED was most likely placed within Palestinian-controlled territory, or if not, within the militarized, 100 meter ‘no-go zone’, adjacent to the physical perimeter constructed from fencing, razor wire, guard towers, and at times, manned sites and concrete walls separating it from the Israeli desert.

To be clear, this attack was not a Palestinian dispatched into Israeli territory affixed with a suicide bomb and intending to kill café diners and scare the populace. The bombing was a military strike against a military enemy by a
(non/sub/quasi-State) military organization. In addition, the attacker and the target represent opposing nations in a constant state of low-level, asymmetric war. Despite such points of fact, this attack, and all that resemble it, is described in the headline and body as an act of “terrorism.” While the conflict certainly produces acts of terrorism from both the Israelis and Palestinians, when this label is used wholesale against a multi-faceted national strategy, it begins to lose a great deal of meaning and its author is further degraded as the silver tongued crafter of untruths.

This simple blog post, an example of the ‘new media’ we are inundated with on a nearly constant basis, exemplifies the nature of rhetorical labeling. Stated quite simply, the labeling of acts of violence is squarely a statist endeavor. If one were to attempt a universally applicable set of rules to predict how such labels are deployed it is this: Violence emanating from the State—be it policing, capital punishment, extrajudicial assassination, or all out war at the level of the nation-state—is deemed legitimate, legal, just and ethical. Conversely, violence originating from outside the State, or that which has the State as its target, is universally seen as illegitimate, illegal, unjust, unethical and often ascribed to the mental state of the attackers; calling such actions crazy, insane or the ‘acts of a madman.’ As Max Weber\(^4\) so famously argued in his “Politics as a Vocation” lecture, the State possesses a monopoly on legitimate use of force. Thanks Max, we get it.

Let us explore another example from the Israeli theater, a setting that never ceases to provide a great number of peculiarities. In 2006, I was living in the city of Nablus in the northern part of the Palestinian West Bank. Nablus is a relatively large city with around 130 000 people, two refugee camps and encircled (at the time) by a series of military checkpoints. For the many wanted Palestinian nationalists unable to pass through the checkpoints and leave the city, it is a nation unto itself. The Israeli security services have called Nablus the “West Bank’s terror capital...a Wild West of Islamic extremism,”\(^5\) or a “factory for suicide bombers,”\(^6\) a claim not completely unsubstantiated in light of the biographical accounts of such attackers. Between 2006-2007, while living and working in Nablus, I met a large number of Palestinians. I met electricians, candy sellers, construction workers, farmers, computer programmers, and unbeknownst to me at the time, I met fighters from a variety of factions. Though living as fathers, husbands and neighbors, I met armed members of Fatah’s al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade, Hamas’ al-Qassam Brigades, and other armed units affiliated with the Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. During my days I interacted with these individuals in a capacity as normal as one can expect given the conditions. Throughout a series of chance encounters, I discovered that many of these young men were awake all night and slept well into the late hours of the afternoon. They do this because during the time between 11pm and 5am they are most at risk for assassination by
covert and uniformed units of the Israeli army. These Palestinian men lived as wanted individuals, many of their names already appearing on lists pre-approved for extra-judicial assassination.

This all changed around the summer of 2007. During this time, the Israeli state announced that it had granted ‘amnesty’ to nearly 200 Palestinian fighters provided they agreed to disarm, renounce violence, and check-in nightly with Palestinian Authority officials. As the Washington Post explains:

At the start of the uprising [September 2000], Fatah supporters formed the Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, an umbrella group for squads of gunmen who carried out attacks on Israelis, most in the West Bank, but also some in Israel. Under the [2007 amnesty] deal offered by Israel, 178 Al Aqsa gunmen would join the Palestinian security forces and be taken off Israel’s wanted list if they refrain from violence for the next three months. Each gunman was asked to sign a non-violence pledge and give his weapon to the security forces. They deal was offered largely to those aligned with specific factions in order to strengthen their position vis-à-vis Hamas. Putting aside the specifics of the amnesty deal, and its relation to factional politics, what is unavoidable in this story is the simple fact that those 178 individuals labeled al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade terrorists in the Summer of 2006, were quickly transformed into the newly emboldened, legal, security forces of the Palestinian Authority by 2007. As the saying (kind of) goes, one man’s terrorist became another man’s cop.

Without even a year passing, many of the previously armed men, after being granted amnesty, were awarded jobs within the quasi-State of West Bank politics. They became police officers, Presidential guards, officers with the intelligence services, and so on. In one quick act of legislation, the men were no longer wanted, no longer hunted, and now legally employed and armed. In the Palestinian context, terminology is key. It is a tool used by the Israeli state to normalize brutal and unusual practices such as “administrative detention” (military prison sentences without trial), “closed military zone” (area where NGOs and human rights workers can not enter because the IDF is operating), “armed clashes” (sparsely armed Palestinian volunteers defensively firing on conscripted and highly trained armed forces), and so on. In each of these framings, State power grants (or detracts) legitimacy to terminologies and serves to muddy the waters for those seeking to contextualize the actions of armed Palestinians.

While in Nablus, I lived in a house nestled in the Old City, behind an-Nasr Mosque, and adjacent to the site of the assassination of al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade leader Fadi Kafisha, which had occurred only days before I moved into the neighborhood. During this period in Nablus, the Israeli military launched
nightly incursions into the city center, Old City, and the adjacent Balata refugee camp amongst other places. Each night like clockwork, shots would ring out and explosions would be heard, and in the morning we would get the reports of injuries, deaths, and the community’s response. In one emblematic report by the BBC, the assassination of Kafisha is described as occurring while “[Israeli] troops had come under fire during a routine operation.” While this report in itself is not particularly inaccurate, and the BBC particularly attune to the language used in such contexts, let us examine the report briefly. According to Israeli policy, following the 1995 Oslo Accords, the city of Nablus was deemed an ‘autonomous entity of the Palestinian Authority.’ This geographic determination is a product of what became known as Oslo 2, or more precisely, the “Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.” This agreement promised Palestinian-control over major population centers within the West Bank including Bethlehem, al-Khalil (Hebron), Jenin, Qalqiliya, Ramallah, Tulkarem and Nablus. Such a history begs the question: If Nablus is controlled by the Palestinian Authority, what is “routine” about the Kafir Brigade’s 93rd Haruv Battalion finding itself in Fadi Khafisha’s neighborhood? Consider the rest of the BBC story which reads: “It seems that Mr. Khafisha got caught up in one of the very frequent clashes between militants and Israeli patrols in the alleyways of the Old City”. In a second accounting of the events, the Jerusalem Post reports, “Thursday morning, troops from the Haruv battalion entered the old city of Nablus on a routine operation when they were fired on by a group of Palestinian gunmen, according to military sources. The soldiers shot back, killing two of the gunmen and wounding five others”. A logical interrogation of this narrative would be: if Nablus is under Palestinian-control, then why would an IDF brigade specializing in urban warfare and counter-terrorism operations be present, and furthermore, why would such an occurrence be a part of a “routine operation”, or described as “frequent”? What is “routine” about an incursion? What is “routine” about an IDF assassination squad hunting Palestinian men? What is wrong with the routine nature with which occupying soldiers can “enter” what is meant to be an autonomously-ruled area?

If one were to ask me to describe in accurate language what happened to Fadi Kafisha that night in 2006, I would say that Israeli army soldiers invaded Nablus—an autonomous area of the Palestinian Authority—rapidly dispatched a specialized team to the Old City, attempted to not alert armed sentries distributed through the area, and intentionally carried out an extra-judicial assassination of a senior leader of a Palestinian armed movement. There is no such thing as a “routine operation” when one party is invading and the other left to either capitulate or defend themselves and be labeled as terrorists. Of course such questions are mediated by State-controlled language. In a blog post issued days after the August 2013 explosion, the IDF describe locating
other IEDs “prepositioned” against their advances and asserted that “The IDF holds the right to maintain its operational accessibility in the area in order to prevent future attempts of executing terror attacks and to protect its civilians.” What precisely is “operational accessibility” beyond the military means and political will to violate Palestinian sovereignty with regular impunity?

II. On Military Wings & West Wings

An examination of the Israeli-Palestinian arena is particularly warranted in these discussions because of the consistency through which the non-State is described in terms of terrorism. Regardless of its tactics, strategy, or quasi-State socio-political facilities, these movements continue to be labeled as on par with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), al-Qaeda, or separatists such as Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA). Like Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian movements manage a massive variety of social service, political, and economic institutions ranging from schools, hospitals and job placement programs to municipal government, local police, and national defense. Despite these structural realities, despite Hamas’ and Fatah’s positions as political movements with armed components, the entirety of these collectives are simply blanketed in terminological defacement—terrorists, the whole lot of them. They produce violence counter to the (Israeli) State—violence that is not sanctioned by a recognized nation-state—and are thus mired with the accouterments of the non-State actor. Their smuggled guns and homemade bombs, armored vehicles and training bases will continue to be seen by most as more al-Qaeda than Army, more extremist than patriotic, more fanatical than heroic.

The use of non-sanctioned violence—violence produced by a non-State entity or violence that is counter-State—elicits a reaction from the State precisely because such actions challenge the production and legitimization of State violence. The State asserts that as integral to its social contract with the governed; the citizenry relinquishes its right to redress grievances through the use of violence, and render such powers solely to that of the State. The usage of violence by social movements and other non-State actors destabilizes this central assertion disrupting the State's veneer of control. In the State's efforts to restore balance, it employs police forces to disrupt, agent provocateurs to discredit, military forces to kill, and an authoritative voice to legitimate its own violence whilst simultaneously condemning extra-legal attacks. The framing of radical socio-political movements as “terrorists” is motivated by an acknowledgment of this contestation wherein a non-State actor utilizes a revolutionary praxis that is rejectionist in nature, thus presenting a challenge to the State's desire to act as not only the protector of capital, but also as the sole producer of force.
Finally, keeping these issues of asymmetric, positional language in mind, let us quickly examine how such messages of State legitimacy are carried forward in our popular culture without much attention. Consider, for example, an episode of the long-running television series, *The West Wing* (1999-2006). In one episode, entitled “Gaza”, the fictional script is written to closely resemble the 15 October 2003 bombing of a US diplomatic convoy that was traveling in the Beit Hanoun area of the Gaza Strip. The bombing killed three people described as “employees of a private security firm working on contract with the [US] embassy”. It is assumed that the convoy was targeted not for whom was inside (which included officials with the CIA), but because it was inscribed with the markings of the US government at large, including such iconic tells as the driving of armored, Chevrolet Suburbans. When the historical record is viewed in light of the television fictionalization, the versions fit in terms of attack typology (remotely-detonated roadside bomb), the targeting of US diplomatic personnel, and the fact that the perpetuator was not a central Palestinian faction (i.e. Hamas, Fatah, Islamic Jihad) but rather an exceedingly small, politically rejectionist, peripheral movement. In the TV version, there are four fatalities: two congressmen, an aide, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This certainly would be a far greater loss to US might than a few Blackwater-type employees.

In the fictional, *West Wing* retelling, after the US President receives his security briefing, he calls on his head General to “prepare contingency plans for retaliatory military action against Palestinian terror targets, including the [Palestinian] Chairman’s headquarters,” implying direct collusion between the non-State attackers and the quasi-State office of the party leader. The linkage between the non-State bomber and the quasi-State government office is a logical reach for the show as the Palestinian national movement—embodied in Fatah and Hamas—has been careful to avoid explicitly targeting American interests in the region in an attempt to narrowly tailor their grievances towards Israel. Later in the episode, the President’s new Deputy National Security Advisor is asked for ‘her view’ of the conflict at large. After going into the center of the room, and gathering the attention of all senior staff, she responds: “Palestinians are no longer fighting to destroy the Jewish state, they’re fighting for a state of their own. A revolutionary struggle against an occupying force, revolutionaries will outlast and out die occupiers every time”.

What is unavoidably apparent to me in this scene is the framing of the conflict alongside of the austere posturing of the White House. Because of the regularity with which the Palestinian movement is defamatorily labeled, hearing them described as ‘revolutionaries fighting occupiers’ is refreshingly attention grabbing. If placed in a different context, it is hard for anyone to debate this...
simplistic yet authentic description of the situation as anything but occupier v. occupied, yet if one accepts such a framing, it places Western ally Israel on the unpopular and expected-to-lose side of history. What power do such narrative framings hold? Why does this interpretation of Palestinian aspirations appear so plausible when said by a fictional National Security Advisor yet so radical when said by Noam Chomsky\textsuperscript{15} or Judith Butler\textsuperscript{16}

The power to label, to dispense legitimacy and illegitimacy, is something so mediated by context and identity that it often slips past us, secluded in our trust or distrust of the source. One way in which this occurs is through constantly reminding us that the threat we face far out weights our ‘normal’ capabilities. When one begins to believe that our military’s budget is too great, they simply must be reminded of G.I. Joe, which portrays an elite yet secretive branch of the US military dispatched to kill opposing non-State actor Cobra. If not for such elite yet opaque dispensers of legitimate State violence, the reanimated corpse of Osama bin Laden would likely rule the US within weeks. Need more examples? One can talk about how organizations like Cobra, the mutant followers of Magneto, the supervillain opponents of Iron Man, or even the based-on-real-events personalities portrayed in the rendition sites of Zero Dark Thirty, are all held up as reason to maintain secretive strike forces of US lethality. For the ranks of G.I. Joe, the X-Men, Iron Man, and the CIA, they are all extra-normal dispensers of State-endorsed violence, and all heroes.

To consider one final example, we turn to the 2012 Quentin Tarantino film Django Unchained. In the film, the recently freed former slave Django (Jamie Foxx) and newfound bounty hunter friend Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) walk into town, and after a brief drink, shoot and brazenly kill the town’s Sheriff in front of a large crowd. When the town’s Marshall arrives in response with “a hundred rifles” trained on Django and Schultz, the men confidently face the armed crowd, and explain the legitimate State basis for their lethal violence. In his monologue to the hundreds of men with guns drawn, Shultz explains:

\begin{quote}
My name is Dr. King Schultz and like you Marshall I am a servant of the court. The man lying dead in the dirt, who the good people of Daughtrey saw fit to elect as their Sheriff, who went by the name of Bill Sharp, is actually a wanted outlaw by the name of Willard Pick with a price on his head of $200. Now that’s $200 dead or alive…This is a warrant [in my hand]…so in other words Marshall, you owe me $200.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

In one swift explanation, the pointblank shooting of one man by another changes from the act of a lawmen’s murder to one of law enforcement. With the possession of a warrant, a piece of paper issued by the State, Shultz’s actions are enshrined in the veil of legitimate State violence with all the
trappings of justice, due process, and the rule of law. Violence that has passed through the rule of law prior to its dispersal is thus not violence at all but system maintenance. When it comes with a court’s warrant, a president’s nod, a police sergeant’s command, or a jailer’s discretion, the violence of executions, wars, cops, and jails becomes both legal and acceptable, and most importantly, legitimate.

IV. Challenging the rhetoric of non-State actors, political violence & ‘terrorism’

This issue of Affinities began with the task of collecting voices of anti-authoritarian scholarship that challenge Statist attempts to control discourses around violence. It left the conceptual stage and entered into the realm of the public with the task of considering several central questions, most notably: What constitutes violence for socio-political movements in contestation. What constitutes the as-yet-to-be constructed continuum from terrorist to revolutionary? As the label of “terrorist” is applied to actors as divergent as the property-destroying Animal Liberation Front and armed, military-styled networks throughout Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Somalia, Yemen, the label would seemingly possess enough linguistic flexibility to lack utility. Throughout this issue the authors sought to problematize, nuance and challenge State-controlled descriptions of violence; both its own violence, such as wars and policing, as well as violence directed against it.

The intention of this issue of Affinities was for our contributors to move beyond stagnant and longstanding inter-activist debates surrounding the themes of violence including discussions of its efficacy and tactical utility. While a great deal of exemplary scholarship has served to advance this discourse, this particular publication seeks to internationalize the debate, to shift the subject outward to a new world of global, sub-State, violent conflicts. To this end we have four carefully selected articles from emerging scholars who seek to challenge how one conceives of (and labels) violence.

In her article, “Organic Shrapnel and the Possibility of Violence,” Lindsay Balfour challenges conventional definitions and categories of violence. She argues that a broader understanding of what violence means and, in some cases, what it can do, might open us to the more relational and thereby ethical possibilities of violent encounters. Working through several ways of re-theorizing violence with regard to hospitality, the body, its spatial and temporal threshold and the significance of the other, Balfour asks: What might it mean to reconsider violence as a site of potential ethical formation and address rather than the foreclosure of relational bonds?

In “Dispute or Disrupt? Desire and Violence in Protests Against the Iraq War,” Andrew Culp suggests ‘queering’ direct action in order to overcome the limits of
rhetorical politics. Culp shows how the Bush Administration's justifications for the Iraq War were incoherent discourses that drew rhetorical opposition into a politics of identification that made them easy to dismiss. An alternative, he claims, are “bodies that mutter” – subjects of desire whose bodily force continues where discourses fail, which he locates in the Code Pink disruption of John McCain’s speech at 2008 Republican National Convention, AIDS crisis-era queer activism, and radical clowning.

In “Notes from a Common Insurrection,” Justin AK Helepolele describes emerging lines of solidarity connecting recent mobilizations in the crisis landscape of Barcelona. The essay explores some of the means by which sectors as disparate as squatters, pensioners and lawyers have come together to challenge official discourses on violence and counter efforts to isolate and demonize direct action. The author hopes that examples from this particular case might inspire efforts to better connect direct action efforts elsewhere.

In “Solemn Geographies of Human Limits,” Timothy Vasko conceptualizes Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), or drones, and the reconnaissance-strike complexes they are said to make possible in their deployment against supposed “terrorist” threats in the Global South. This task is accomplished primarily through Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopias. The spatiotemporal relationships that drones and their reconnaissance-strike complexes constitute, Vasko argues, are indicative of recent shifts in the process of conceptualizing and confronting security problematics in strategic counterterrorist discourse and practice. The author traces these problems through a.) the geopolitical threats to which drones are said to respond, b.) the logic of novel coding technologies and principles upon which threats are calculated, and, c.) their imbrication in novel modes of cultural taxonimization of occupied peoples.
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10 Brannon, 2006.
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