

# Impact of Terrorism as an Asymmetrical Threat on the State's Conventional Security Forces

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**Abstract**—The main focus of this research will be on analyzing correlative links between terrorism as an asymmetrical threat and the consequences it leaves on conventional security forces. The methodology behind the research will include qualitative research methods focusing on comparative analysis of books, scientific papers, documents and other sources, in order to deduce, explore and formulate the results of the research. With the coming of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the rising multi-polar, new world threats quickly emerged. The realistic approach in international relations deems that relations among nations are in a constant state of anarchy since there are no definitive rules and the distribution of power varies widely. International relations are further characterized by egoistic and self-orientated human nature, anarchy or absence of a higher government, security and lack of morality. The asymmetry of power is also reflected on countries' security capabilities and its abilities to project power. With the coming of the new millennia and the rising multi-polar world order, the asymmetry of power can be also added as an important trait of the global society which consequently brought new threats. Among various others, terrorism is probably the most well-known, well-based and well-spread asymmetric threat. In today's global political arena, terrorism is used by state and non-state actors to fulfill their political agendas. Terrorism is used as an all-inclusive tool for regime change, subversion or a revolution. Although the nature of terrorist groups is somewhat inconsistent, terrorism as a security and social phenomenon has a one constant which is reflected in its political dimension. The state's security apparatus, which was embodied in the form of conventional armed forces, is now becoming fragile, unable to tackle new threats and to a certain extent outdated. Conventional security forces were designed to defend or engage an exterior threat which is more or less symmetric and visible. On the other hand, terrorism as an asymmetrical threat is a part of hybrid, special or asymmetric warfare in which specialized units, institutions or facilities represent the primary pillars of security. In today's global society, terrorism is probably the most acute problem which can paralyze entire countries and their political systems. This problem, however, cannot be engaged on an open field of battle, but rather it requires a different approach in which conventional armed forces cannot be used traditionally and their role must be adjusted. The research will try to shed light on the phenomena of modern day terrorism and to prove its correlation with the state conventional armed forces. States are obliged to adjust their security apparatus to the new realism of global society and terrorism as an asymmetrical threat which is a side-product of the unbalanced world.

**Keywords**—Asymmetrical warfare, conventional forces, security, terrorism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A state's conventional forces have played a major role throughout human history. State militaries have always been an important pillar of society, defining its values and

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even shaping its culture. Besides providing security from external threats, a country's conventional forces were also employed as rescuers - providing assistance to civilians in dire times, but most importantly, they serve as a strong deterrence measure. However, as the global society is becoming an inherently more complex system, the traditional approach to military and conventional warfare is starting to change. Terrorism, as today's most pressing security issue, is actively reshaping the conventional idea of conflict. As an asymmetrical threat, terrorism is a very useful tool for waging low intensity conflicts, proxy wars or accomplishing various geopolitical objectives at a relatively low cost, while at the same time avoiding a direct war. Terrorism cannot be strictly defined as an external or internal threat, and as such, it can be easily exploited by various domestic or foreign political players. The state's conventional forces, primarily designed to oppose a symmetric adversary, are currently facing an elusive enemy, a challenge which demands a different approach. Throughout history, various factors and circumstances have been influencing realignments and modifications of the state's military, and today, terrorism along with other asymmetric threats from the fourth generation of warfare are pushing conventional state forces to employ new and unorthodox strategies in order to accomplish their primary objectives. The following article focuses on terrorism, asymmetry in warfare and explaining how these factors reflect on the role of the state's conventional forces.

## II. TERRORISM AS AN ASYMMETRIC THREAT

In today's contemporary world, terrorism is probably the most feared as well as the most anticipated threat that could happen to a country and potentially destabilize it. However the threat is not new or young. The idea of terrorism as an insurgency in order to accomplish certain political goals pre-dates modern society. The so called "terrorism from below" emerged in the Middle East at the beginning of the new era. One of the earliest and well known groups was the *sicarii*, famous for their short blades or the *sica*. The group was often portrayed as a religious one but at the same time it had displayed various characteristics of a social movement against the rich. The group was engaged in many acts of diversion such as burning granaries, public archives and sabotaging the aqueducts. *Sicarii* were formed in Jerusalem and were the first group which practiced "unusual tactics" in their endeavors. A similar group which also emerged in the Middle East was the Assassins, an offshoot of the Ismailis which appeared in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The group was formed in Persia but managed to move quickly to Syria killing prefects, governors, caliphs and

even Conrad of Montferrat, the Crusader King of Jerusalem. The Assassins were a small group and their leaders quickly realized that they could not face their enemies on an open field; therefore, the group embraced the asymmetric path of combat. Very skillful and disciplined, the assassins managed to operate in almost complete secrecy conducting their operations and spreading terror. In the end their efforts were mostly futile, a religious sect trying to defend their way of life from the overwhelming Seljuks. Nevertheless, their group and approach to fighting a superior enemy quickly turned into a legend which still occupies the minds of many researchers [1]. The modern day terrorism, which has its origins in the "philosophy of the bomb", also pre-dates the invention of explosives. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a radical democrat from Germany, Karl Heinzen, laid the founding elements for the modern aspects of terrorism. Although his rhetoric towards political violence was to a certain extent contradictory; namely, Heinzen did not approve of murder and deemed it as a forbidden act, though he also argued that the same principles cannot be transferred onto the political realm. He believed that the physical liquidation of hundreds or even thousands can be justifiable if it was made in the name of a higher interest of humanity. He was also an advocate of tyrannicide, which served as a starting point for his idea, which he deemed as an important act of liberation. Though Heinzen never actually participated in a terrorist attack, his ideas resonated heavily among other groups during that time. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many nationalist groups started employing terrorist or insurgency methods in order to accomplish their political agenda. One of the most famous terrorist groups was certainly the Russian *Narodnaya Volya*. Although the group only lasted for three years before all of its members were arrested, they made a significant mark on the development of future terrorist organizations. The group's main goal was the assassination of the Russian Tsar, which ironically happened after the dissolution of the organization in 1881 [2].

Despite the term's longevity, there are no definitions which can comprehensively define terrorism. It is almost as every state, international organization or institution has its own definition of this social phenomena. Therefore, instead of listing these definitions, we should look at the common denominators which are present in them and how they correlate with the term. Terrorism is characterized by an individual or group form of violence in order to accomplish its goals, and it employs fear which is presented in the most brutal and spectacular form possible. Its base *modus operandi* implies the use of asymmetrical warfare employing any tools or weapons which are available. And finally, terrorism or terrorist groups usually evolve in underdeveloped or ruined countries but are trying to concentrate their operations in highly developed states. Alex P. Schmid argues that terrorism shares and has certain affinities which can be seen in genocide. Schmid further elaborates that terrorism in its core represents a one-sided attack of the armed aggressor against an unarmed and defenseless victim. This asymmetry of power, along with the fact that surrender or capitulation, is not accepted by the aggressor and is what creates terror, while at

the same time, this is what differentiates terrorism from other forms of organized violence such as war [3].

In order to better understand terrorism, we need to recognize the factors which induce this phenomenon as well as to examine the wide spectrum of terrorist organizations and how they are categorized. When referring to the factors which enable terrorism, Martha Crenshaw classifies them as preconditions-the factors which set the stage and precipitants-events which immediately induce terrorism. Preconditions can be further divided into enabling and permissive factors which provide opportunities or situations that terrorists can exploit in their favor. Finally, all these factors are mutually intertwined with a transnational dimension and are not limited by a nation or a state. Modernization is the first factor which significantly bolsters terrorist opportunities. As modernization inevitably increases complexity on all levels, it also induces new vulnerabilities. Transportation, communication and the overall interconnectedness of a modern society allows better terrorist mobility but also the means to publicize their acts. Along with modernization comes urbanization. Ever-growing cities are providing target abundance for any terrorist organization. Lack of political participation or political opportunities for a certain sub-group and their overall treatment in a society can lead to a terrorist action as well. Economic disparity, sharp ethnic or religious tensions, especially in underdeveloped countries, usually leads to terrorism or some kind of an insurgency. Finally, one of the most important factors which allow terrorism to happen is the passive stance of the government or the political elite in the country to seriously engage certain social issues which can evidently lead to the terrorist reaction [4]. David Rapport argues that modern day terrorism can be classified as a "forth wave" terrorism which came after the breakup of empires, colonization and anti-Western leftist terrorism. He further explains that the crucible of contemporary terrorism is in the global power struggle: central vs. local power, small vs. big power, and modern vs. traditional power. Despite the fact that Islamist terrorism has its roots in religious extremism, it can still be perceived as a class or economic struggle of poor against the rich or underdeveloped against the highly developed countries. Either way, the anti-globalization sentiment is very strong and present in every aspect of the modern terrorist narrative [5].

Classification of terrorism and terrorist groups can be done from different perspectives and according to terrorist activities, motivations, goals or place of operations. Some authors categorized terrorist organizations according to their goals (ideologically motivated, motivated by separatism and religiously motivated groups), according to their methods and weapon employment (classical, biochemical, nuclear, conventional, suicidal, cyber and narco-terrorism), and according to the actors (individual, institutional and organized terrorism) [6]. Terrorism can also be classified as internal, which includes state terrorism<sup>1</sup> and revolutionary<sup>2</sup> terrorism,

<sup>1</sup> State terrorism can also be referred to as State terror. The states do not use terrorism *per se*, the governments employ terror in order to establish total control over its population. It cannot be strictly called terrorism because methods employed by the state and by the terrorist organization is not the

and international terrorism, which includes colonial<sup>3</sup> terrorism and terrorism for independence<sup>4</sup> [7]. Most classifications of terrorism are actor-based; however, there are also other approaches. Author R. Chakravorti categorizes terrorism into three different sections: establishment, anti-establishment and criminal-professional. Chakravorti's classification of terrorism is mainly concentrated on the relationship between the terrorist and the state. Another interesting classification is that done by Lizardo and Bergensen, which examines terrorist groups and the world system. Therefore, we have core actors against the governments, peripheral or semi-peripheral actors against peripheral or semi-peripheral states, and peripheral or semi-peripheral actors against core states [8]. Most of today's terrorist groups can be placed in the third section, this somewhat location-based classification is very important since it emphasizes the struggle between peripheral or third world countries against the core or powerful countries. The huge economic gap which is still growing between "the haves and the have nots" and the asymmetry of development between world regions is fueling the insurgencies and terrorism which follows it.

### III. ASYMMETRY OF CONFLICT – THEORETICAL APPROACH

Asymmetric warfare, similar to terrorism, is much older than it might seem at first glance. Asymmetric warfare can be traced back to the Roman Empire and its battles against Carthage and Hannibal. Examples of this type of warfare from our recent history can be observed in the conflict in Vietnam, and even the Persian Gulf war was to a larger extent a very asymmetric war. In fact, every conflict or war whose actors largely differ in strength and capabilities can be categorized as an asymmetric conflict. However in the present day, the term asymmetric conflict is usually closely related to that of irregular warfare. In other words, asymmetric conflict refers to unconventional tactics usually employed by non-state actors. Modern asymmetric warfare is defined by non-state actors who employ unconventional tactics against state's vulnerabilities in order to achieve disproportionate effect, while undermining its ability to achieve strategic objectives. In the post-modern era of warfare, asymmetry is very common since the state-centric character of conflict is actively being replaced with non-state actors. Non-state actors can include terrorist, criminal organizations, and guerilla or insurgency groups which can employ unorthodox tactics, biological or nuclear weapons and methods which do not belong to the spectrum of regular state-centric forces. Nevertheless, we

same and neither are the political goals. Although the result is fear or terror induced in the nation's populace.

<sup>2</sup> Revolutionary terrorism can also be described as leftist terrorism. Best examples of this are Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany and Red Brigades in Italy.

<sup>3</sup> Colonial terrorism is induced by a state or a colonial power therefore it is better to talk about this phenomena as terror rather than terrorism. Goal is to achieve total influence over the colony and suppress any kind of interference.

<sup>4</sup> Terrorism for independence can also be portrayed as separatist terrorism where armed groups are reaching for terrorist tactics in order to achieve victory over the government on a certain territory. IRA is probably the best example of this.

should keep in mind that asymmetric warfare is not terrorism; rather, terrorism is part of the tactic which weaker sides utilize in order to suppress the stronger opponent [9]. The non-state actor phenomenon, which to a larger extent represents the crucible of today's irregular warfare, has been present for quite some time. The big difference in the non-state actor section was made after the end of the Cold War and the sudden disappearance of a patron-proxy relationship. Today's terrorist, guerilla or insurgency groups operate on a different scale and it is very difficult to track down their sources of funding or their sponsors. However we can see an interesting trend where terrorism and organized crime are converging in order to acquire financial resources and expand their operations. This is also a very important factor since it allows for non-state entities to acquire tools which can be used to further develop their asymmetric warfare capabilities.

An important part of asymmetric warfare is its political aspect or interest motivation, which can even determine the final outcome of the conflict. If power was the only factor determining the outcome of the conflict, then we should not see that the weaker actors can defeat much stronger opponents. Although this is not a common phenomenon, weaker actors have managed to surpass a much stronger adversary. There are two important factors which favor the weak side in an asymmetric conflict. The first factor is the interest or motivational gap. Andrew Mack in his book, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars", argues that the actors with the most resolve and will to fight, regardless of their power or material resources, can determine the outcome of the conflict. If the power gap between conflicted sides is bigger, so do the political vulnerabilities of the stronger side enlarge. Therefore the stronger actor or big nations lose not because they lack military power but because they lost their political momentum, which leads us to the second factor [10]. The political momentum, especially in democratic societies, is a very important aspect when the nation is participating in any kind of war or conflict. If the conflict is asymmetrical and is fought against a weaker opponent, the stakes or potential loses can be blown out of proportion. American engagement in Vietnam and the failed mission in Somalia are good examples of how small military loses, for a big power such as the US, can impact and even determine the withdrawal of its forces. Both of these conflicts were very asymmetrical and the power gap was huge, hence any kind of failure from the US side was perceived as bigger and heavier than it actually was, finally resulting in a huge political dissatisfaction. Though the asymmetry in a conflict certainly favors the stronger side, it also limits its potential field of errors. When fighting an asymmetric threat, a stronger opponent has only one objective and that is victory, any other result of that conflict most probably will lead to a loss of political legitimacy. On the other hand, as long as there is an absence of a clear defeat for the weaker side in the asymmetric conflict it will result in a political victory [11]. Political dimension is very important for a government when dealing with a non-state actor in an asymmetric fight since it can distort the perception of the conflict or the actual threat.

#### IV. THE FUTURE OF ASYMMETRIC WARFARE AND THE SECURITY ROLE OF THE STATE

It is very difficult to pinpoint a symmetric war; in fact, all wars are asymmetrical because all countries differ in power. However in the past, this difference was usually evened out by comparative advantages between the conflicted entities with the main asymmetry primarily being portrayed in the resources. In other words, the winner was decided upon by the ability to sustain their economic and political system despite the constant attrition costs of war while replenishing their armed forces. Probably the best example of symmetry in warfare was during the Cold War. Having the nuclear weapons, great powers assured that any deployment of such weapon would result in a mutual total destruction (MAD) [12, p.20] However, after the end of the Cold War, conflicts became drastically asymmetrical and filled with non-state actors. This trend of asymmetric warfare conducted by non-state actors is most likely to continue in the future, mainly because of the following reasons: terrorist or insurgent groups are becoming a frequent threat evolving in underdeveloped or ruined countries; certain regions in the world are becoming chronically unstable providing great opportunities for these organizations; terrorist organizations are constantly evolving and finding new ways and opportunities to fund and expand their operations, increasingly merging with criminal organizations or conducting criminal activities; hybrid and irregular warfare, which are becoming ever more popular among international entities, are based on asymmetry; future state-to-state conflicts will probably be conducted by proxy groups rather than through standard military interventions.

In order to understand asymmetric warfare and the threats which follow it, we also need to examine irregular, sub-conventional and hybrid warfare which are very closely related to the first term (in some cases they are even being used as synonyms). Irregular warfare can be described as a violent struggle between a state and a non-state actor over political influence on a certain territory. Irregular warfare in itself has a very strong notion of asymmetric threat and is employed as a method by various non-state actors including terrorist, criminal or other insurgency-like organizations [13]. Sub-conventional warfare encompasses a wide spectrum of military and paramilitary operations over an extended period of time, which is conducted by surrogate forces that are organized, trained and equipped by an external source during the time of war or peace. Sub-conventional conflicts also include terrorist, guerilla or some kind of an insurgency force which are focused on subversion, sabotage or any other kind of clandestine operations. Although these kinds of conflict will not cause immediate damage to the opponent, in a long run, sub-conventional warfare can have devastating effects [14]. Last of all we have hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare is a relatively new term which emerged in 2014 directly after the Ukrainian crisis and the Crimea issue. Despite becoming a buzzword for Russian meddling in the Ukrainian crisis, hybrid warfare has its place on the battlefield and it is very closely related to the idea of asymmetric warfare. Hybrid warfare is also practiced by non-state actors employing sophisticated

technologies, methods and tactics in an unconventional way thus reshaping the battleground. However, hybrid warfare can also be used by a state. States can synchronize and coordinate its powers (economic, political, military and informational) in order to expand the battlefield and put large amounts of pressure on the opponent [15]. In other words, hybrid warfare exercised by a state or non-state actor, is a form of asymmetric warfare wherein the adversary is subjected to a complex strain of events which are aimed at disabling its political, economic and military capabilities by employing all available military and non-military tools.

All of these types of warfare are asymmetrical in their essence, while also being employed by the entities which need to rely on the asymmetric doctrine. Furthermore, these conflicts can also be categorized as low intensity conflicts, or *LIC*, which are becoming very popular in our contemporary world. Today, many states, especially regional and world powers, are using *LIC* as a practical tool to deter or destabilize their adversaries while avoiding full-blown direct war. In this type of warfare, the symmetric and asymmetric approach is the main axis around which the idea of conflict revolves. The regular or symmetric approach to warfare is being put aside simply because it is impractical, costly and cannot provide the sophistication or effectiveness of a hybrid, sub-conventional or irregular-type of warfare.

Fighting against asymmetric threats or actors which employ asymmetric warfare can also be very confusing. With conventional forces or in symmetric conflicts, success can be relatively easy to measure. Conventional military measurements such as: territory gained, casualties suffered or leaders killed cannot be applied to the actors who participate in the asymmetric conflict, especially if they are non-state actors. This is especially notable when we observe terrorist organizations and state's efforts to suppress them. Since the early 2000's, Washington was very consistent with its counter-terrorist strategies which were eventually successful and resulted in the killing of Osama Bin Laden. Despite numerous foiled terrorist attempts, prevented incidents, terrorist camps and bases destroyed, the terrorist threat of Al Qaeda is still present. During most of this anti-terror campaign, the US employed overwhelming conventional force, not taking into account the large toll it would take on the American financial sector [16]. The US is not the only example of this. Employing an overwhelming conventional force in order to tackle an asymmetric threat is evident in Turkey against the PKK, and most recently in Syria and Iraq which ended in failure.

As it was mentioned earlier, the reason for using asymmetric warfare is rooted in the power gap between the conflicted sides. In order to bridge that gap and achieve strategic objectives, terrorists (today's most common asymmetric actor) are employing various tactics and strategies. Provocation is a tactic which is trying to prompt a vigorous reaction from an adversary that can consequently undermine its own interest. Terrorists often try to provoke such a reaction from a state believing it can be beneficial to the group, although it can also undermine their interest. Despite its obvious form, provocation does work and often

results in unseen casualties on both sides. Another tactic used by terrorists is polarization. Insurgency groups also try to polarize society or delegitimize the government in order to justify their cause. This can be especially effective in heterogeneous and democratic societies, in which certain minorities do not have equal treatment or lack in some social opportunities. The main aim of this strategy is to drive the regime to the right side of political spectrum and provoke repression or terror. Final, strategy is mobilization. The goal of this strategy is to recruit fresh members for the terrorist groups. Today, due to the modern technology of communication, mobilization is a much easier task than it was in the past. Mobilization can also be achieved by specific attacks which are not aimed directly against the state's interests but are done in order to provoke some kind of a reaction from the populace hoping it will invigorate or energize fresh recruits [17]. All these strategies are directed against the particular vulnerabilities of the states in order to exploit them. Furthermore, in order to prevent these tactics or outmaneuver the actors, states cannot rely solely on conventional forces. In fact, using conventional forces in this asymmetric environment can induce a counter effect. All these strategies of asymmetric warfare which give terrorist organizations leverage to fight a state's government require an adequate and precise reaction that is also unorthodox and asymmetric in essence.

When combating these asymmetric threats states have two primary approaches, enforcing law or using military force. The law enforcement option was dominant in the past and was usually focused on terrorism as a criminal act; however, as times are changing, terrorism as well as some other asymmetric threats, are increasingly becoming a global phenomena unbound by state territory or its laws. In recent times, countries, and even certain world regions are becoming great destinations for terrorist groups. Plagued by political instability, poverty and war, these territories simply cannot resolve certain security issues which have global implications. Therefore many developed countries that feel threatened by these criminal, terrorist or insurgent organizations, will wish to engage and hopefully eliminate the threat. However this is the military approach which inevitably implies using a military force [18]. Although many would consider this to be a part of the preemptive doctrine, it would be still very difficult to explain to the international community how deploying a fully organized conventional force to another country is a counter-insurgency or anti-terrorist operation and not a full-blown invasion. Therefore, precision and restraint are crucial when using military force for these types of operations. The mentioned attributes are more often associated with unconventional or special operation units rather than with conventional military forces.

Future conflicts will require a force that can challenge and overcome the difficulties of asymmetric warfare. Today, special operation forces are probably the best answer for deterring or resolving an asymmetric challenge. Three main roles of Special Forces (SF) that heavily influence the outcome of an asymmetric conflict are: penetration and strike,

warrior-diplomats and global scouts. These roles enable Special Forces to: 1) be employed under the most austere conditions in order to accomplish various multidimensional operations in the most sensitive areas, thus resolving a terrorist situation, denying the usage of weapons of mass destruction or striking key targets with precision; 2) the second role of SF is heavily emphasized in the US military as warrior-diplomats. SF can help, train, enhance and pass on the combat experience to other allied militaries, and thus improving state cooperation, but also maintaining a home country presence in other regions; 3) as global scouts, SF can quickly gather and analyze critical information that can be of crucial importance for military operations. This also allows them to maintain the edge against potential asymmetric adversaries [19]. Asymmetric threats generally avoid conventional military doctrines and use everything at their disposal to disrupt or to offset the adversary. Such threats are very difficult to detect, and even then, conventional forces have a level of response dilemma. It is rather complicated for a conventional force to act and respond effectively against terrorists or insurgents and not cause collateral damage or civilian casualties [20, p.37-38]. The risk of collateral damage and civilian casualties, especially in a complex and populated urban areas, is something that non-state asymmetric actors prey upon. In order to avoid such scenarios, it is crucial to act with precision and restraint.

## V.CONCLUSION

Throughout history, many countries employed regular armies or conventional forces in order to quell insurrections either on theirs or foreign soil. However with the upcoming age, a non-linear approach to war is ever more popular among global players. State and non-state actors who wish to destabilize their potential adversaries or achieve certain political objectives in our contemporary society will more often reach out for tools of asymmetrical warfare rather than using conventional military means. Terrorism or different forms of insurrections have become a favorable device for global and regional powers in their desire to achieve geopolitical objectives by waging proxy wars or other low intensity conflicts. In order to deter or conquer the adversary, a country must be capable of preventing various asymmetric challenges, including terrorism and insurrections. Although conventional military forces are very important for every country due to their structure, training, capabilities and resources, they are unable to efficiently resolve asymmetrical issues. Conventional military forces represent the crucible of the country's security apparatus, the main leverage which can deter the enemy and also protect the territory from any external threat. However in the fourth generation of warfare, conventional forces are constantly facing challenges which are not in their primary spectrum of response. Though no country in the world will give up on its conventional military, we should expect certain modifications as they are unable to efficiently resolve asymmetrical issues. Terrorism, as the world's current and most important security issue, will pressure country's conventional military structure to re-

evaluate, and to a certain extent, reshape its objectives as well as methods by which it functions. As did the sudden progress of technology and industry change the approach to conflict after the First World War, proliferation of terrorism and asymmetric threats today will have the same effect on the overall perception of warfare and the role of conventional military forces in it.

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