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Extract from Series: ON THE THROES OF TRANSITION

Terrorism - Analysis, Assessment, Action

By Serena Joseph-Harris ATA

Part IV – "Defining ISIL as a Movement"

Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidarity to pure wind.

George Orwell

Policy-making and theory application are by no means mutually exclusive. Those of us who influence policy and take decisions are very often required to base decisions that we make on imperfect information, in moments of extremely high risk, and on issues that generate greatest emotions. We make these decisions knowing that our actions are likely to be harshly judged at some future time. Theory becomes critical because it provides important tools to assist us with these challenges but nonetheless theory cannot be oversimplified. Ultimately, no one theory will work perfectly in combination with others.

That being the case, in the ongoing inquiry we shall adopt multiple perspectives multiple lenses to cater for multiple perspectives in order to reap optimum academic and practical benefit from the diversity of persuasions and theories that abound on this topic. For this reason this installment undertakes a commentary on the contemporary scholarship surrounding concepts that are germane to the discussion - the notion of "new and emerging regionalisms," " transnational movements" and the constantly evolving definitions of terrorism. Furthermore, we pay close heed to a very pertinent proposition made many years ago by regional luminary in Latin American /Caribbean Affairs, Norman Girvan, who noted in his exegesis, <u>New Caribbean</u> <u>Thought,</u> that what constitutes the Caribbean as a region is often an issue of context and perspective influenced by geopolitics, geoeconomics and even more so political organization. This discussion therefore aims at assisting the readership in navigating the contemporary conceptual and definitional challenges that must be identified, extrapolated, understood and resolved in working towards a unified strategy to overwhelm a phenomenon with constantly metamorphosing features and whose parameters are at once self-defining and indeterminate.

The Concept of Region and Definitional Challenges

It is commonplace that scholars engaged in discussing the concept of "region," are content to pivot around physical, political and economic criteria which in their view are exclusive to regions in the absence of any concerted attempt to examine and comprehend the theoretical developments on the topic. To illustrate this point consider Edward Mansield and Helen Milner (1997) who placed emphasis on geographical proximity and specificity as the key defining traits of a region whilst Thompson (1973) essentially left

the concept undefined. In a similar vein, exponents of history and political science posture that regions are physically discernible; while Alan Winters's (1999.8) detailed discussion on multilateralism significantly sidesteps the notion of regionalism as its obvious close counterpart – opting to regard the notion of a region as contextual to "any policy designed to reduce trade barriers between a subset of countries, regardless of whether those countries are actually contiguous or even close to each other." None of these approaches was helpful in overcoming the glaring definitional challenges that persisted on the topic, not to mention unraveling the character and functions of those regions that have undergone major alterations.

Regions Have Changed in Character and Function

Because regions have changed both in character and in function, arriving at definitional solutions has presented many challenges. One major change lies the attribution of relative weights to various levels of the global, regional and the national - and the necessary links between them. During the Cold War most regions consisted of political or mercantile clusters of neighboring countries that had a larger place in the international system; and from time to time political and military motives would foster the emergence of super-regions such as NATO and the Organization of African Unity.   However, following the fragmentation of great power blocs and certainly since the late 1980s, subregional and microregional organizations have proliferated, and noticeably so. Within the Americas we see the emergence of MERCUSOR and other political blocs such as the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the Union of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (CELAC) - a successor of the Rio Group and the Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development (CALC); the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA); the Union of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (UNASUR) - a union of South American countries that effectively integrated two existing trade blocs while allowing for their continued autonomy); and farther afield the Visegrad Group, the Shanghai Group and the Baltic Council of Ministers, to name a few.

As second major change is the growing differentiation between physical (geographical and strategic) regions and functional (economic, environmental and cultural) regions and the fact that this aspect of transformation appears to be linked to the first major change. Despite the fact that the nation-region nexus is still viewed largely in terms of physical and state-centric terms and despite the increasing emphasis on the global-regional relationship, more attention is being paid to functional and sub-regional relations.

Methodological Revisions in Rationalist and Constructivist Research Agenda

Apart from these two aforementioned transformations, the study of regionalism is also undergoing a methodological renewal manifested in the new divide between the rationalist and constructivist research agendas. Whereas in the past, regions were often delineated and compared in time and space inductively using data on institutional and economic ties – Russet (1967) used this approach as well as O'Loughlin and van der Wusten (1990). Further to this, and in relation to the Americas Frankel (1997) adopted the inductive approach which led to the finding in 1994 that regional trade concentration ratios were the highest in MERCUSOR and the Andean community and this was to be followed by ASEAN, NAFTA and the EU, in order of performance.

The constructivist approach places focus on how regions arise from the redefinition of norms and identities by governments, civic groups and business firms in contrast with to the materialist approach to regionalism, which is rooted in rationalist arguments. Against this backdrop, the use of common cultural identities to define regions stemmed from the decolonization process leading to the construction of "culture blocs" (Meinig 1956). This "social construction" of regions so to speak meant that regions were being shaped by the collective perception of identities and meanings with blurred and ever-shifting boundaries. This construct rejects the static conception of regions and regards them instead as changing cognitive structures cemented by common institutional and economic ties (Murphy 1991). Constructivism emphasizes the instrumentality of regionalism in promoting political and economic goals. In this milieu actors create social facts by assigning various functions, which are never intrinsic, but rather, are relative to the interests of users and observers. Furthermore, the functions assigned to social facts can be either agentive or non-agentive, with the former serving the intentions of actors and the latter occurring independently. Of special note is the fact that military alliances have agentive functions.

This being the case, in discussing "regions" in the ongoing series key concerns will evolve around the division of the world firstly, by levels of analysis and secondly, by simultaneously applying the physical-functional distinctions with the physical referring to territorial and economic spaces and controlled primarily by states; and the functional defined by non-territorial criteria such as culture and the market. The latter categorization is without exception the sphere of influence of subnational actors. In consequence, social movements are best analyzed in terms of how they take root, evolve and overwhelm artificially created boundaries prescribed by a rigid range of criteria. To compound all of this, we also need to come to terms with the boundary-eroding consequences of globalization, identity formation, as well as the extra-territorial challenges to sovereignty that these forces are prone to unleash.

What is irrefutable is that major political and economic changes have altered relationships among various layers of the international system producing different effects in the political-military and functional spheres. Similarly unassailable is the fact that with the shrinking of the state the national level has lost much of its influence and this has fostered new linkages between the global and regional levels on the one hand, and between them and the local level on the other. This phenomenon replicates itself in international relations whereby a process of vertical re-organization is visibly occurring and emphasis is shifting both upward and downward from the national level as business pressures from below play a major role in the formation of regional economic associations. Also striking is the impact of these changes in the functional sphere where the organizing power of the state is diminishing and that of the global market and local initiatives is growing. Hence the relevance of the growing influence on non-state actors, as mentioned in the earlier sections of this discourse.

That being so, vertical and horizontal transformations occurring on a worldwide scale have led to a growing disjuncture between the static-place character of physical regions and the dynamic-flow character of functional regions, and in the process diverting attention away from the study of regionalism and regional organizations among scholars to the analysis of regionalization. Simultaneously, attention is being redirected from military and political issues to the society, the economy and conspicuously - culture.

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Strategy Must Be Grounded and Shaped by Ongoing Empirical Research

On this score, one of the primary objectives of defense planners and strategists has been in uncovering the conditions under which social and political movements, both localized and trans-territorial and aimed at large-scale political and economic change, originate and in gaining a clearer understanding of their characteristics and consequences by analyzing the intrinsic and extrinsic forces that are at work. With this in view, in 2008 the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) initiated an important long-term project that will inevitably have significant implications for future policy, strategy and tactics. Designated "the Minerva Initiative," the project is intended to improve the DOD's understanding *of*

the social, cultural, behavioral and political forces that shape regions the world, and more specifically, that are of strategic importance to the United States.

What Minerva Does

The program seeks to define and develop a functional knowledge about the sources of present and future conflict with an eye towards a better grasp of the political trajectories of *key regions*. A significant component of Minerv*a is* that it brings together universities, research institutions and individual scholars and supports disciplinary and cross-institutional projects addressing specific topic areas determined by the Secretary of Defens*e*. Areas of research that are already in train include culture and identity; belief formation and influence; identity influence and mobilization; power deterrence, projection and diffusion; governance and the rule of law; beyond conventional deterrence; innovations in national security conflict and cooperation and additional factors impacting societal resilience and change. What these topics all share in common is the ephemeral notion of evolving regionalisms and trans-territorial social movements, their origination, evolution, influence and impact.

The Socio-Cultural Context is Acknowledged

Minerva research entails, but is not exclusive to, modeling the dynamics, risks and tipping points of large-scale social movements around the world giving rise to activism, large-scale unrest and violent extremism. The program was designed in a manner that would exploit the obvious benefits of university-based resources and networks while being administered and overseen by designated military agencies. Empirical modeling is about the development of data to create templates of social movement mobilization and contagions by studying the digital traces of various forms of local and trans-territorial social and political currents. Examples of such events would be the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the 2012 Nigerian subsidy crisis, the 2011 Russian Duma elections, and the 2013 Gazi Park protests in Turkey. Research findings from modeling experimentation will thereafter be employed to inform policy, frame strategy, make predictions and, in the longer term and it is hoped, be fed digitally into on-the-ground war theaters.

During the inceptive phases of the project certain independent scholars had expressed concerns over what they perceived as the government's efforts to "militarize" the social sciences in the service of war. The American Anthropological Society, for example,

wrote to the government expressing its point of view that the Pentagon lacked the type of infrastructure needed to evaluate anthropological research in a manner that involved rigorous and objective peer review. Such research, in their view, ought to have been assigned to civilian agencies such as the National Science Foundation.

This Forum Commits to Unified Approaches

Notwithstanding these argumentations, this forum sees strategic sense in putting in place reciprocal and reinforcing policy and strategic frameworks at regional and subregional levels to track, manage and monitor transnational social movements along with their inherent predilections or otherwise towards violence and fundamentalism.

The employment of regionalism theory is therefore well within sights of the ongoing discourse vis-à-vis the equally relevant analysis and interpretation of how transnational social movements are somehow replicated in style and form at the individual level, and how at higher levels they are able to pool *their individual sovereignty to work together as a cohesive organization regardless of differences of diversity and origin*, as described by research fellow, Candyce Kelshall, in Hitting Where It Hurts. In point of fact, the Combating Terrorism Center of the United States Military Academy (USMA) in West Point has provided copious insightful studies, white papers, analyses and commentaries that draw upon an array of authenticized primary sources, as for example, original payrolls and inventories dating as far back as al-Qaeda in Iraq, that were retrieved by authorities prior to the withdrawal of forces from that country. This material (which is now selectively available) when collectively considered points to the high level of organization and institutionalization that assisted in the hardening of the Islamic State and accounts for and makes sense of its systemic resilience through constant and deft adaptations and expansions despite dramatic changes in war theaters. Regarding this last point, Kelshall rightfully and veraciously calls attention to the overarching governance elements *brought about by the creation of institutions that orchestrate, oversee and monitor the gains and the cementing of the group's ideology and* values, thereby enabling these transnational movements to prevail and defy traditional borders and state-centric responses.

Strategic Politico-Cultural Assessments of Sub-Regions in the Americas

Taking this into account, it is important to note also that as part of a broader scheme of initiatives, the U.S Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) partnered with Florida International University (FIU) in 2009 under an undertaking in which the university's Applied Research Center in collaboration with the Latin American and Caribbean Center worked in developing strategic cultural assessments of countries in the Americas. The venture is intended to achieve a more explicative understanding of the political, strategic, and cultural dimensions of state behavior and state foreign policy in various subregions of the Americas. Lending salience to the enterprise is the fact that the project includes *a findings report* on the *impact of Islam and Muslims in Latin America*. This project further underscores the importance and relevance that planners and decision-makers have attached to gaining a fuller understanding of the social and cultural conditions under which movements that result in wide-scale disturbances in different regions and sub-regions of the world metamorphose. Thus far, Strategic Assessments have been extended to Guatemala, Peru, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Paraguay, Honduras, Panama, Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Belize, Guyana and Suriname. The Surinamese Strategic Culture Findings Report, authored by Drs. Jack Menke and Orlando J. Perez, was presented to a working group that convened in Miami in 2011. Likewise, the <u>Guyana Strategic Culture Findings Report: Leaders</u> <u>Leveraging Landscapes</u> formulated by Dr. Ivelaw Griffith, was promulgated later that year.

"Terrorism" – Unraveling the Definition

Lastly, the central idea in Bruce Hoffman's book "Inside Terrorism" is the potted historical usages that have gone hand in hand with the appellation, "terrorism," and the dramatically evolving nature of the concept, which continues to undergo stark transmutations in how it is deployed. The term has its origins in early conceptualizations that were popularized and applied to the Jacobins, their agents and partisans during the French Revolution. Hoffman, who is an authoritative analyst of terrorism and the recipient of the U.S. Intelligence Community Seal Medallion - the highest level of commendation given to a non-government employee - also noted that during its early years, the concept had a positive connotation under the system referred to as the *regime de la terreure* in 1793-4. During that transient anarchical period of turmoil, "terrorism" was understood to mean not what is commonly conjured today - anti-government activity undertaken by non-state or subnational entities. Rather, it served as an instrument of governance wielded by the recently established revolutionary state. Certainly, it can be

argued that similar forms of state- imposed violence and terror against the government's own citizens persist today.

In its current context the terrorist's goal is ineluctably political - to fundamentally alter a political system through violence while instilling widespread fear. How this universal message is communicated is therefore a key weapon in itself - a consideration that underscores James P. Farwell's clarion call in his article "The Key to Destroy ISIS is Information Warfare, " that is to say for a "…war campaign driven by a powerful credible narrative that demoralizes, divides, confuses, and frustrates ISIS members to blunt their effectiveness as fighters."

Ironically, terrorism in its original context was also closely associated with the ideals of virtue and democracy - revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre firmly believed that virtue was the mainspring of popular government at peace, but nonetheless that during the time of revolution, must be allied with terror in order for democracy to triumph. This entailed the complete overturning of an old system for a new one, and necessitated the mobilizing of antithetical forces, both overtly and covertly. Mussolini demurely insisted that this type of movement was by no means "terror," but merely "social hygiene." Most notable is the fact that his fascist movement shared many key characteristics with the emergence of Nazism under the Weimar Republic as well as with other extremist movements of the right in other parts of Europe during those turbulent years of modern history.

So what's in a name, one may be inclined to ask? The importance of Kelshall's intervention is by no means to be underscored or overlooked. Part I of this ongoing series admitted to the absence of a universally agreed definition of terrorism, a state of affairs no doubt owed to political contrivance.

Word Usage is Inherently Politically Tainted

Roughly seventy years ago, George Orwell noted in <u>Why I Write</u> that the English language was in a bad way and that the decline of language must ultimately have political and economic causes, and on this merit, the flaw went decidedly beyond the mere bad influences of the writer. He observed that a mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence were the most marked characteristics of English prose and cited what he referred to as "various tricks" by means of which the responsible work of prose construction and word usage were "habitually dodged." These "tricks" included *dying metaphors*; *verbal false limbs*; *pretentious diction* and *completely meaningless words*. Orwell took pains in discussing at length what he earnestly believed to be a likely subversive connection

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between politics and the debasement of language. Political language, he says almost incredulously, was specifically designed "to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidarity to pure wind."

In the estimation of this forum linguistic mischief, or more stridently put political shenaniganism in its many variations, can only be repaired through intelligent thought, informed discussion, an objective analysis of the issues, the adoption of appropriate theoretical perspectives and heedful selection and application of the best methodological approaches. Wisely combined, these tools would go a long way in developing a more unified and mutually supportive bi-regional strategy to ultimately defeat this phenomenon; and to this we all commit.

Serena Joseph-Harris ATA

Chief Executive Officer

Sirius International (Caribbean) Defense Contractors Ltd

Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

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