# The Same Old Story

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> It is a small step from acknowledging the role of the mass media as a link between terrorists' actions and their intent to induce terror to asserting that the media are acting in complicity with terrorists and are blameworthy for this. The Right Honorable Lord Chalfont (1990) cited the "depressing fact" that "newspapers, radio, and television have probably done more than the terrorist organizations themselves to make organized political violence glamorous and successful" (p. 18). Davies (2003) claimed that modern communications "have done more than anything else to promote terrorism as an effective way of waging war" (p. 25). Wardlaw (1989) specified this by arguing that media are an avenue for expressing and overdramatizing terrorists' views, and that media permit contagion of destructive methods, hinder police operations, increase terrorists' sense of power, and provide technical information to terrorists. In these ways, the media become participants in terrorism itself. (Neil J. Smelser, *The faces of terrorism: social and psychological dimensions*, 2007: 111)

For reasons that have become clear nowadays, the (Human Rights Watch -HRW) keeps on incessantly denouncing the Ethiopian government. I argue that many factors—and ideology, too, for that matter—are inseparable parts of the driving motivational complex for the HRW to work hard to tarnish the image of the Ethiopian government. Last week, HRW has added another voluminous report to its ever-increasing cascade of reports.

To be honest, we are bored to death by the insidious incrimination that HRW is leveling against the Ethiopian government; and I cannot hope to respond to all its allegations and unveil the sheer inconsistency being observed in the report concerned.

In writing this article, one of my aims was to cast light on the methodology HRW has employed in conducting its research and producing its report. However, I could not do so for I felt that this would definitely hinder my interest to carry out useful discussion that does not require specific knowledge that could not exclude all other interested general readers. Thus, I have self-consciously shunned this important issue, while I can assure you

that in the eyes of the pundits, this report is unforgivably marred with numerous methodological defects that would render it unacceptable even as a zero draft.

Dealing with such pedantic issue like the research methodology would relatively bring difficulty in communicating with many interested general audiences. Thus, I believe that I have good reason to put aside this issue, for I am fully aware of the limitations of academic materials not only for nonprofessional readers but also for policy makers and policy executors.

There are inherent reasons why reports produced by international rights organizations and academics do not interest—and may even irritate—those in policy arenas. At the most general level, academics, policy makers and journalists have different and non-comparable priorities. The academics are typically interested in general explanations arrived at by objective examination of available evidence, while the rights groups are interested in the advocacy of human and political rights with a view to promote the concerns of their financers.

Besides, many of the explanatory factors the academics identify lie beyond the possibility of political or public intervention. While those in the policy arenas are interested in applied, timely decisions and implementations intended to have desired effects, those in the academia are not. In consequence, people on both sides of the advocacy (academy)–policy divide often cannot hear one another, and become impatient as a result.

For the latest report by HRW has take issue with journalism, visa-vise Ethiopia's anti-terrorism act, I opted to discuss the implicit connection existing between the press and terrorism, and thereby indicate the reconcilable positions of the Ethiopian government and its stubborn detractors such HRW.

For a time being, let all other ideological, political elements of the discussion be us subsided; and one may deduce that the controversy is a result of two different cultures facing each other. To begin with, terrorism policy reflects the disconnect existing between the people of thought (advocacy and academics) and the people of action, actors in an extreme way. By its very nature, terrorism demands focus and urgency, because it is uncertain and because it carries threats of death and destruction. Most policy makers

cannot afford to appreciate the nicety, conditionality, and qualifications of academic analysis and accept the vilification of rights groups. This tension is super-imposed on a traditional residue of mutual stereotyping and distrust between the people of thought (advocacy and academics) and the people of action.

## Terrorism and Journalism

Although behavioral and social scientists have fallen short in studying and understanding terrorism, some knowledge has accumulated. Thus, I will mobilize some important academic knowledge on this and other topics I raised in this article.

For one thing, contemporary terrorism is a result of a peculiar combination of ingredients culminating in a specific form of violent behavior. For another, we know much about phenomena that are parts of the terrorism package. This knowledge can be brought to bear on understanding the relationship between terrorism and journalism or modern media facilities.

Scholars have located a number of snarls in our thinking about terrorism and the practical predicaments in our dealing with it. Some scholars prefer to call these predicaments as "entrapments." Many of them arise because terrorism has foisted them on democratic societies. They are points of confusion and controversy—many touching the fundamentals of our political system—that result in repeated and seemingly irresolvable debates and conflicts. Furthermore, the entrapments do not yield solutions, because discourse seldom moves outside or rises above their own internal dynamics.

One example of these entrapments are conflicts over defining terrorism and diagnosing the role of the media, and understanding the tension between security and civil liberties in responding to terrorism.

Considering its geographical location and its being at the neighborhood of a failed states which has been serving as a safe haven for a terrorist groups like *Al-Shebab,* and the infamous rouge state in Asmara etc it would be mandatory for Ethiopia to devise a legal framework that would help it fighting terrorism.

Moreover, the repeated terrorist attack Ethiopia has endured in the last two decades could unambiguously suggest the strong need to formulate and ratify anti-terrorism Act, and it did the same. However, Ethiopia's Anti-terrorism Act has spurred incessant and heinous criticism from some opposition parties, Western states and various international human right groups as well.

Therefore, last week, HRW has "reprinted" the usual criticism under the title *"Journalism Is Not a Crime" - Violations of Media Freedoms in Ethiopia."* HRW's latest report is still "following the usual suspect" - the Anti-Terrorism Act, accusing it for stifling the press freedom. HRW has admittedly declared the grave shortcoming of the report attributing its failings in part to the Ethiopian government restriction on human rights research in the country and has asserted, "The report is not a comprehensive assessment of the media freedom situation in Ethiopia."

The report has this dramatic depiction of fabricated events, I argue, to impress its ignorant Western readers and thus garner support in the campaign against the anti-terrorism act passed by the Federal Parliament, in 2011.

It has further stated, "Human Rights Watch and other independent national and international human rights organizations face extraordinary challenges in carrying out investigations in Ethiopia given the government's hostility towards human rights investigation and reporting." Therefore, I will try to focus on identifying the structural shortcomings of the HRW report.

Human Rights Watch claims to defend the rights of people worldwide, but as the fact on the ground would absolutely testify, it is steadfastly standing in defense of the interests of its financers. It also asserts that it is "scrupulously investigating abuses, expose the facts widely, and pressure those with power to respect rights and secure justice." This, I think, is a two-faced promulgation of the HRW that has eventually culminated in harming the little reputation (if any) of the organization.

Human Rights Watch has alleged to be "an independent, international organization that works as part of a vibrant movement to uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights for all." Hence, in its January 2015 report titled, *"Journalism Is Not a Crime"*

*- **Violations of Media Freedoms in Ethiopia,*** it complain about "the status of press freedom in Ethiopia."

Contrary to what HRW argue, I think it is important to advocate some kind of regulation or control of the media, if we wish to shield innocent civilians from the barbarous assaults of terrorists. In fact, such control is regarded as normal and even acceptable in wartime.

As historical records would reveal, there were efforts made by various governments to muzzle the press. For instance, the Spanish government in its struggle against the Basque movement has tried to silence the press. West Germany had the Anti-Constitutional Advocacy Act in the terrorist era of the 1970s, while the Irish government's ban on the state radio and TV from carrying interviews with IRA representatives and sympathizers.

Mostly, however, democratic governments had been reluctant to impose censorship or otherwise restrict freedom of the press, and have relied more on appeals for self-regulation. But, that is in old days. Now, every western country are advocating and/or ratifying legislations to regulate or control of the media.

We may argue over the wisdom of muzzling the press by legal means or other coercive measures taken by governments. Besides, we may also disagree over the desirability of the intervention of governments in controlling and regulating the media, apart from appealing for self-regulation. For instance, both Thatcher and Reagan were appealing for self-regulation.

It is to be recalled that after the hijacking of the *Trans World Airlines Flight 847* in 1985, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in her oft-quoted phrase, said that television should "find ways to starve terrorists . . . of the oxygen of publicity." Moreover, earlier, Ronald Reagan had framed the issue dramatically in a complaint published in a journalism trade magazine in 1977:

> **"If the nation's television assignment editors and radio news directors would take a collective deep breath and declare a moratorium on live coverage of terrorist events during the commission of the crime, they would be cutting off the source of inspiration for an untold number of loose nuts who harbor crazy ideas."**

Nonetheless, one thing is true. Now everybody would be in complete agreement on the fact that the press is the necessary component of terrorism; and to that extent, we must work hard to ensure that the press is not engaged in promoting terrorism. Even the most liberal Western states are nowadays changing their traditional position.

# Things in Perspective

A quick look at pre-9/11 political history would reveal that many nations have history of defending against terrorism. Reading of that history would reveal that something new is coming out of the contemporary responses to terrorism, with a landmark turn of events and the salience of American unilateralism, which bred by the extremity of the historical events in 2001.

As we all know, the September 11 attack had escalated the attention of politicians, policy makers, the media, and the American citizenry to an unprecedented level. They still live daily with the repercussions of those events and that is tempting to treat the present as a new world. In my view, it would be an error to assume that the world is the same after 9/11 and the sudden sprout of the ISIS that has stunned the world community.

On the other hand, considering history one would realize that almost all counterterrorist measures were reactive, that is, selectively introduced in the face of some major incident or in the face of terrorists' choices of new targets. The awe-inspiring terrorist incident in the US in 2001, and the recent Paris episode would conform that counterterrorist measures are all inspired as reaction. Even in Israel, which thought to be the most comprehensive and forward thinking in its counterterrorism, the pattern showed evidence of responding selectively to new sources of danger.

Terrorists on their side are also opportunistic. For instance, when the United States moved to improve airport security in the early 1970s, hijackers turned to less secure airports, mainly in the Third World. When airport security made hijacking more difficult, they turned to the sabotage of aircraft. When embassies were converted into garrisons in the 1980s, terrorists turned to other targets. Here two games are consistently in play—catch-up by the countries under terrorist attack, and cat-and-mouse on the part of terrorists. Thus, great differences among countries' counterterrorism strategies are observed.

Unlike the present, France was slow to develop antiterrorist measures at all, in part because it was wed to its historical role of providing asylum for political refugees. Italy relied on compromise and partial amnesty, and its response was also limited by its continuing ties to Arab countries. Nonetheless, because of the constancy and seriousness of the IRA presence, according to some scholars, Britain's antiterrorist measures were perhaps the most extreme. Countries that have been attacked by terrorist groups and are facing imminent threats have somehow t develop antiterrorist measures.

For obvious reason, not all antiterrorist measures have observed an equal level of politicization. In the case of Ethiopia, Western rights groups, like HRW and Amnesty International (AI), have been active in the "politicization" of the anti-terrorism act Ethiopia had adopted.

Like any government in world, the Ethiopian government is legally duty-bound to protect its citizens from the any barbarous assault and as a result creates a legal framework to that effect. In the wake of any attack, the party in power will be compelled by the sweep of public outrage to take some measure. Therefore, it cannot be passive. This impulse arises both from the pressure of immediate public opinion and expectations. If the government does not act aggressively, it will lose public favor. This thing applies to any political parties— whichever is in power. The ruling party EPRDF did the same; as a result of which it becomes the target of western powers and agencies.

## History

Shortly after the bombing of the World Trade Center, a number of American scholars attempted to step back and assess the twenty-five years of political response to terrorism on the part of several of the countries -most directly affected by it—the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, France, Israel, and the United States.

The declared purpose of those scholars was to analyze the effect of national responses on civil liberties, but in effect, they also included consideration of the nature of the terrorist threat each country faced and touched on all the major governmental and public responses to it. Some the general points emerged from their analyses and these are:

Each country redefined the responsibilities of or created new military and paramilitary organizations for fighting terrorism. Besides, countries studied have undertaken some "restructuring of the organization chart" for dealing with terrorism. This meant a mix of redefining responsibilities for some agencies, creating new agencies, and creating new coordinating machinery. In some instances, decisive action was delayed or deflected by jurisdictional rivalries and jealousies.

Each country introduced legislative or administrative measures that strengthened the hand of intelligence, security, and military agencies, particularly with respect to investigation, arrest, and detention. Each country pursued or agreed to join in a diversity of bilateral and multilateral international agreements to counter terrorist activity. Each country pursued some policy of hardening targets—arguably the easiest line of action for governments—that were thought to be most vulnerable to terrorists (important personages, airports, train stations, and publicly significant buildings). Each country experienced public demand for strong governmental action to protect the lives of its citizens, which led in turn to pressures to curtail civil liberties in different ways.

However, until recently international terrorism did not prove to be the major destabilizing threat to liberal democracies, neither did the responses of those states realize the worst fears regarding the demise of civil liberties. Citizens were subjected to the daily harassments of inspection and search associated with target hardening; Great Britain in particular imposed restrictions on the press. In some cases, overzealous interrogation and arrest were recorded.

In the United States, mainly because most of its terrorist experience consisted of attacks on American installations abroad, there was very little terrorist-related political intrusion domestically. This situation changed dramatically, however, in 1996, when after a period of stalled efforts to legislate, the Oklahoma City bombing precipitated the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act, which made it a crime to support terrorist activities and strengthened the government's power in a number of areas.

Again, in the wake of September 11, 2001, the hastily passed Patriot Act extended federal arrest and interrogation powers, authorized greatly increased surveillance and aggressive sanctions against foreign nationals, and permitted a number of intrusions on the privacy

and traditional rights of citizens. Both pieces of legislation have proved controversial and criticized for an unknown effectiveness in diminishing the threat of terrorism.

Generally, aggressive policies toward terrorists were often the source of political opposition and partisan division, but given the current turn of events who can argue that Ethiopia is less disposed to terrorist attack than any countries of the world. Nonetheless, the tension between security concerns and civil liberties will continue.

For instance, the US legislations had divided the polity along hardliner-libertarian lines. The queer thing in this regard is that the two major political parties in the US contain both hardliners and libertarians. Hence, the division is not exactly partisan, but the struggles take on partisan overtones.

However, efforts to limit the media meet with opposition from both the media (which condemn censorship and defend their historical independence and their objectivity, as well as "the public's right to know") and from civil libertarian groups. Such conflicts tend to repeat themselves and run along familiar and well-warn paths.

# The Media Drama

Solutions regarding the media's role in the terrorist process are apparently unavailable; this produces a recurrence of vigorous controversies in which preset partisan and ideological postures are activated and for which stable solutions are not forthcoming.

Its essence is that existing institutional and cultural arrangements, which are highly valued in a democracy, become the focus of repeated controversies when confronted with the complex of terrorism, with all its ambiguities and threats.

These controversies do not lend themselves to solutions because to intrude on those arrangements appears to compromise sacred ingredients of the democratic process. The media, as institutionalized in democratic societies, have a function that is directly relevant to the democratic process itself: to provide citizens with news and interpretation of events, with the presumed effect of contributing to an informed citizenry. This function is a principal basis for the media's legitimacy as an institution. At the same time, they do not perform this role in a straightforward way.

They are implicated in a complicated network of interested actors, including themselves, which places conflicting demands on how they perform that role. What follows is a generic analysis of this network of forces, phrased with special reference to the issue of terrorism. The main actors on the stage in the media drama are:

• The media themselves;

• The reading, listening, and viewing publics;

• Business and commercial organizations that advertise in the media and sometimes own them;

• Political actors, notably the political party in power and the opposition party, as well as issue-oriented groups, both hostile to and protective of the media;

• Terrorists;

Each of these groups has its own values and interests. As an institution, the media are committed to presenting the news fairly and accurately, and under the constitutional provision of freedom of the press, they are free to do this without the formal intrusion of outside agencies, especially governmental ones. In practice, however, there are constraints on this activity. The media themselves do not wish to go unread, unheard, or unwatched. Consequently, they are constrained by their perceptions of what they imagine their publics want to hear. The interest of these publics is sometimes informed empirically by audience surveys, but it is also informed by a certain amount of imagining and guessing.

Moreover, different media appeal to different audiences. Some elite newspapers and public radio and television, for example, cater to what they imagine to be a serious, educated, intellectual audience, and they look down on and deliberately play down the sensational. Much of commercial radio and television (for example, the personal talk shows) and tabloid rags highlight sex, conflict, violence, intrigue, and anything else sensational. The rest of the media fall somewhere in between. Beyond this concern with audiences, the media have other values and interests. They do not simply wait for the news to come to them. Given their priorities, they seek it out.

Nobody can guarantee or control the news that the media print or air. One can, however, influence it by trying to make that news appear as favorable (or as unfavorable) as

possible—twisting facts, assigning motives, reframing by referring to positive or negative frameworks or values, and so on. Spin is a way of making or remaking the news when news cannot be dictated. This account of the forces influencing the media leads to an appreciation of their role in the relation to terrorism and terrorists.

On the one hand, almost all who write about terrorism have perceived and acknowledged that terrorists want maximum publicity of their actions in the interest of influencing their various audiences. On the other hand, terrorism has all the ingredients of newsworthiness. It is frightening and violent, and for that reason, alone it catches immediate attention. Furthermore, it is in the interest of media, in competition with one another, to "get inside terrorism"—to provide facts and explanations about it that will further excite audience interest.

More remotely, terrorism strikes at the heart of social order. If it is domestic terrorism it kills, destroys property, and constitutes a challenge to the government and keepers of the peace. If it is international terrorism, it does all these things and threatens the nation's safety from without. Because terrorism produces publicly visible events with which federal, state, and local governments are obliged to deal responsibly, these governments immediately come under scrutiny as to how effectively they are dealing or have dealt with such events.

How effectively or how ineffectively the government is dealing with the threat is a public agenda. The result is a continuous process of monitoring how well the government (and how presumptively effective or ineffective the opposition parties) is doing in the "war on terrorism." All these considerations guarantee that terrorism will be at the top of the news.

In that sense, it can be concluded that the media are friends of and conspirators with the terrorists, simply because they afford terrorists the publicity they want. But, that is not the end of the story.

On this score, those who write about media and terrorism— and no doubt the public as well—are in continuous disagreement and disarray. In that sense, the writers are also actors in the drama played out in this entrapment. Is there a productive exit from the

entrapment involving the (presumptively) adverse effects of publicizing terrorism and the principle of freedom of the press?

It is difficult to envision one without the sacrifice of some fundamental democratic principle. Perhaps the most helpful path would be for a consortium of leaders in the worlds of journalism and law to adopt a systematic code of responsibility with respect to the reporting on terrorism (and perhaps on crime and violence in general). Unfortunately, over the last two decades, the Ethiopia press has proved itself unable to forge such professional solidarity. Therefore, they failed to devise code of conduct to govern their professional practices and hence trim their excesses. I suggest that Ethiopian journalists should have one very urgently. And the code should be as explicit and practical as possible.

In addition, journalists—perhaps through their professional associations—should establish concrete administrative, quasi-judicial machinery for assessing specific cases of violation of the code and meting out sanctions of censure of media and reporters. Such an arrangement would help to preserve the freedom of the press and appease the concerns of the public and the Ethiopian government.

## Media and Terrorism

Many writers stressed and underscored the fact that terrorism without publicity is bound to be limited in its capacity to instill terror, because publicity is the main mechanism for spreading terror-inducing information. The evolution of the mass media over the past several decades, especially the development of television and the electronic media, has guaranteed that any dramatic act of terror occurring anywhere in the world will be widely available to the public within minutes after its occurrence.

The fact that virtually every medium and its viewers regard terrorism as newsworthy makes this effect inevitable. In addition, the presence of potentially critical media, widely regarded as a necessary feature of a democratic society, also guarantees that counterterrorist activities on the part of a government will also be the object of close public knowledge and scrutiny, and that this shapes their repertoire of responses to terrorism.

I know the role of the mass media is complex. But, at this point it can be stressed that the mass media cannot be left out of account in assessing the resources available to contemporary terrorism and they contribute to its potency.

Several treasured features of democratic societies, which arguably are their greatest sources of political strength and stability, are also points of vulnerability to infiltrating and to organizing and executing attacks. These are civil liberties, such as those defined in our constitution, especially rights limiting police powers and the intrusiveness of the state, legal due process, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. Especially important are institutionalized rights to privacy.

The significance of these rights with respect to crime in general and terrorism in particular is that it makes secret planning and movements more difficult to detect and prevent, for the obvious reason that they make it more difficult for governments to secure information on and track the movements of terrorists.

There is a second reason why the task of gaining precise knowledge about attacks is so formidable. The decisions to attack are grounded in highly specific historical situations of the moment and often based on last-minute decisions to proceed or not proceed with an attack, even if it has been planned in advance.

Among the considerations that enter the decision to launch an attack are (1) the terrorists' reading of the political situation, including the likely symbolic and political impact of an attack, (2) the completeness of their plans, (3) the availability and training of their attack personnel, (4) their sense of immediate opportunity, and (5) their sense of immediate risk, which includes their perception of defenses against attack, the disposition of counterterrorist forces, and the likelihood of retribution (the deterrence factor).

Each of these factors weighs differently in any given attack, thus adding to the indeterminacy associated with it and leading to the necessary but regrettable conclusion that it is impossible totally to predict or prevent actual terrorist attacks, much as we aspire to do so.

Appreciating the dynamics of ideological elaboration also permits us to grasp its dynamic character. Ideology is not a thing, fixed in time, but rather a continuous process of

development and rationalization, forever adding, forgetting, explaining, and adapting to the world as new events and situations—particularly unanticipated ones—arise. This ideological dynamic manifests one additional notable feature. Once a party in conflict has enunciated more or less articulately the ideological essentials that guide it, that ideology takes on a life of its own and becomes something to which its advocates must pay direct attention.

Put another way, ideology becomes interest. Its exponents must assure that it remains alive—by repeating it, by publicizing it, by honing it, and by protecting it from actual and anticipated criticisms. Furthermore, and ironically, the ideology becomes something of a prison for its believers.

They must continuously examine their own plans and behavior to ensure that they are not blatantly inconsistent with the claimed ideological principles; they must try to protect it against those who point out apparent inconsistencies by denial, explanation, or some other defense. This particular dynamic assures that when some mission of conflict is undertaken in the name of a voiced ideology, it is virtually guaranteed that a large part of that mission will be the production of ideological spin designed to maintain the ideology in its most favorable light and to protect it from critical assault from within and without. The media will serve in this regard.

## Audiences and Motives

A necessary component of terrorism is that it relies on audiences. Its intended effects simply cannot be realized if it cannot reach those audiences. A further corollary is that, because they are typically small, local, and secret, terrorist groups do not have direct access to audiences and therefore must rely on institutions and organizations that mediate between them and their activities and the intended audiences. These are the media (appropriately named in this context, because they lie between and communicate, back and forth, between terrorists and their audiences).

Another twist on these relationships is that the media themselves, having their own independent interests, must be counted as both audience to be influenced and communicator of influence to other audiences.

As the media have progressed over time from town crier through print and radio to mass television, they have become an ever more potent component of terrorist activities and are now capable of transmitting radio and television accounts and images of terrorist events deemed newsworthy around the world more or less instantaneously.

The foregoing statements about audience and media are beyond controversy. What do they have to do with the motivation of terrorist activities? Stated simply, terrorists must rely on publicity as an essential component of any success they might hope for, and this reliance becomes an interest and thus a motive on their part. They cannot ignore either audiences or the media if they are to communicate their message and affect the attitudes, emotions, and behavior of those they intend to influence. They must influence audiences through the media, and they must consider the best ways to do so as one of the ingredients in their planning and execution of activities. Therefore, the Ethiopian government has every reason to cast its eyes on how the media is doing and must act to straighten anomalies when things went wrong. As Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn had once said, "the government is duty-bound to fight terrorism whether it comes under the cover of journalism or bloggers."