

COOPERATION THEORY AND TERRORISM

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of the Al-Qaeda attacks on the world trade center on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (henceforth 9/11), there have been a number of examples of coordination and cooperation between states, eventually leading to the “War on Terrorism” in Afghanistan and Iraq. Similarly, wars have broken out in other parts of the Middle East, involving Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. Israel’s attacks on Hamas and Hezbollah<sup>1</sup> in 2006, though not directly linked to the 9/11 attacks, were undertaken following a hardened stance on terrorism by the United States. These wars have not been extensively studied in the literature assigned on cooperation theory<sup>2</sup>, and thus form interesting cases that can be studied under the realist, liberalist and constructivist theories of international relations.

In the following sections I analyze the three aforementioned theories and apply them to the events in the aftermath of 9/11. Thus, the idea is to do a comparative analysis of the three theories in order to specify which one explains the case of *cooperation breakdown* in a more logical way (emphasis added). There is indeed concern that the specific case of terrorism is not relevant here, since that would not constitute a conflict between states, but rather between a state and a political movement. However, as the resulting conflicts of 9/11 show, the conflict may have begun with a state against a terrorist group, but the conflict quickly forms into a state-state conflict<sup>3</sup>. For example, the 9/11 attacks were carried out by Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden, however the nation of Afghanistan was ultimately attacked for harboring the terrorist group. Therefore, since the attacks are eventually designated as “state-sponsored” attacks, terrorism is indeed relevant, not so much in its beginnings, but more so in its aftermath.

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<sup>1</sup> Hamas is primarily a Palestinian organization deemed as a terrorist group by the world following numerous suicide bombings in Israel by the aforementioned group. Hezbollah, by contrast, is a Lebanese organization also deemed a terrorist group.

<sup>2</sup> These wars are not covered by the literature because the studies were published at an earlier date.

<sup>3</sup> This is largely due to the responsibility of the terrorist attacks falling on the state harboring the terrorist group.

## **Realist approach**

As stated by Wendt (1992), the realists tend to push the idea of an overarching anarchical system in the international spectrum, causing wars to happen because “there is nothing to prevent them”<sup>4</sup>. The inference drawn here is that since there are no inherent rules (or “guiding principles”) in the international system, states act upon their natural predatory instincts in order to provide the “initial impetus” for conflict, and therefore, the states that are preyed upon must respond to the predator by defending themselves or, indeed, counterattacking them. Jervis (1978) uses this very same realist stance to construct the “security dilemma” and the conditions under which cooperation may take place. Jervis’ analysis is slightly less relevant to terrorism per se, because he uses the backdrop of the US – USSR cold war as his backdrop<sup>5</sup>. The underlying assumption of the security dilemma is that states are “of roughly equal power”<sup>6</sup>. The third world hypothesized by Jervis is rather more relevant (and one where the security dilemma does not exist) for the specific case of 9/11.

According to the realist view, domestic politics and natural predatory practices alone support the outbreak of conflict. So, given the case of 9/11, Al-Qaeda struck the US because it is in the nature of terrorist groups to cause unrest. In turn the US attacked Afghanistan, since the Afghani state was harboring the man responsible for the 9/11 attacks (Bin Laden). Next, the US attacked Iraq out of “self-help” (or self preservation), carrying out a preemptive strike against a perceived threat. The same holds true for Israel and its strikes on against Palestine and Lebanon. Cooperation broke down in both all three cases of abject terrorism (with attacks by the terrorist groups as the first strikes and then all subsequent attacks being retaliatory). The flaw in the realist stance is the assumption that states (in order to prevent war) pile up armaments (be they defensive or offensive) as preventative measures, and thus cooperation is borne out of the fear of retaliation. If this were indeed true, the states containing the terrorist groups would have taken much greater steps in ensuring that the

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<sup>4</sup> Here, Wendt quotes Kenneth Waltz (1959)

<sup>5</sup> And rightly so, given that his work was published in 1978 during the cold-war era.

<sup>6</sup> See Jervis (1978): 212

terrorist groups within their borders are not capable of such strikes. It may be argued, however, that only after the hardened stance of the US against terrorist groups did the states “sponsoring” terrorist groups realize the danger posed to their sovereignty and their citizens. However, after 9/11 the US demanded the Afghani regime (the Taleban) to hand over Bin Laden or subsequently come under attack, the Taleban did not acquiesce to the demand, clearly aware of the US’s superior military capability. Thus the realist assumption of self preservation (in Afghanistan’s terms) clearly does not hold in this case. A similar argument can be established for both Palestine and Lebanon. The main difference here would be the case of Iraq and the US, where the US was indeed acting out of self preservation and the probable gains from defecting were much higher due to Iraq’s various resources<sup>7</sup>. Based on this, the realist approach would have the weakest logic in establishing cause for cooperative breakdown.

### **Liberalist Approach**

The liberalist approach focuses on the development and maintenance of institutions, treaties and “regimes” in fostering cooperation between nations. Stein (1982) champions this view stressing the importance of “joint rather than independent decision making”<sup>8</sup>. When states find mutual gains in pursuing the same or a similar outcome, a regime can be formed and maintained to oversee the adherence of each state to the collaborative effort. Examples of this phenomenon are abound vis-à-vis the United Nations, the IAEA, the WHO, etc. More recently the alliance between the US and the UK in combating terrorism is also a telling example of cooperation. Indeed, Sandler (2004) alludes to these alliances in studying the success and failure of provisioning for regional and global public goods<sup>9</sup>. Sandler takes a liberal approach as well; highlighting domestic and economic issues that

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<sup>7</sup> See Jervis (1978): 178-9

<sup>8</sup> See Stein (1982): 301

<sup>9</sup> See Sandler (2004): Chapter 10

surrounded the successes and failures of treaties dealing with global warming and ozone layer depletion.

The liberalist approach can be taken in studying the aftermath of 9/11 as well. In the case of the US and Afghanistan, the Taleban leaders clearly saw relative gain in keeping their collaboration with Bin Laden and defecting against the US for various reasons. Prominent among these reasons was the resources commanded by Bin Laden<sup>10</sup>, the hero of the Afghan war against the Soviet Union. Thus, the Taleban would consider handing him over to the US (with whom they shared less in common) as a threat to their sovereignty in Afghanistan. Similarly, Hamas and Hezbollah are well known to have strong political support in their regions as well due to their humanitarian efforts (at the grassroots level) as well as their hard stance against the “oppressors” (Israel). In the case of the US and Iraq, the interests of both parties were in opposition, though Iraq did concede and allow the UN weapons inspectors into their country. The US claimed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD’s) whereas the Iraqi contention was that they did not. Under the liberal argument, the UN regime should have been able to settle the dispute (it had done so in the past), but was nevertheless unable to convince the US and thus the failure of the regime allowed the US to conduct a pre-emptive strike. In accordance with Stein’s analysis, the institution remains, though it was indeed powerless to stop the outcome. The liberal contention of states collaborating through institutions is valid, though in this particular case it was not able to maintain the collaboration; nevertheless the institution has not dissolved and is not likely to be dissolved. The liberal logic is under threat if one is to accept a single counterexample as the basis of refuting the theory. Thus, the liberal logic does better in explaining the outcome of 9/11 (as compared to the realist approach), however there do exist examples of when it is not directly applicable (as shown above).

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<sup>10</sup> Bin Laden was well known to be wealthy, extremely charismatic, and enjoyed significant political power in Afghanistan.

## **Constructivist Approach**

Wendt (1992) takes the constructivist approach in trying to understand cooperation between states. It is his contention that there is interplay between institutions and processes that bring about outcomes. Therefore, he alludes to the evolution of relations between actors as the guiding principle. Each state gains its identity essentially through the perceptions of other states. He provides a logical argument (based largely in psychology) to show that past dealings between actors influence future reactions. Thus, if a particular state is deemed a threat<sup>11</sup>, it will continually be thought of as such until it takes significant steps to prove otherwise. He acknowledges the “self-help” contention of the realists, but adds that evolutionary processes force actors to redefine themselves over time. A fitting example would be that of globalization, which has caused many countries (not the least of which is Pakistan<sup>12</sup>) to redefine themselves in order to gain faster economic growth.

So, we can apply the constructivist approach to our aforementioned conflicts to see if it adds anything to the analysis. By studying the history of Afghanistan, Palestine and Lebanon, we can see a pattern of mistrust between the nations and (what may collectively be called) the West. Afghanistan, largely due to the Afghan wars of the past two centuries with Western nations, was extremely mistrustful of the West. Lebanon had earlier been a French colony and then fought with Israel over territory. Palestine was virtually taken over by the state of Israel after decolonization. Therefore, there have existed deep roots of mistrust between the actors long before 9/11. Similarly, Iraq had already gone to war with the US in 1991 after it invaded Kuwait. This time, the mistrust lay with the US because of past actions of the Iraqi government. Furthermore, in contrast with Russia, there were no efforts on the part of each of these Middle-Eastern actors to reinvent their images. This conforms

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<sup>11</sup> Wendt outlines the case of the Soviet Union and its subsequent “New Thinking” as the basis for his arguments. See Wendt (1992): 408-410

<sup>12</sup> I mention Pakistan here because it has consistently managed to change its identity over time, given the overwhelming Islamization in the 1980’s to marginal liberalization today, owing (in part) to its need to compete with India (a rapidly globalizing nation) on the world stage.

to Wendt's constructivist approach and helps explain the breakdown of cooperation between the states.

## **Conclusion**

Wendt's analysis is by far the most thorough and logically compelling. His approach combines the realist and liberal camps to induce his logic flow. Because of this, the structure of my paper is no mere coincidence. Each of the theories builds upon each preceding theory and explains a portion of the cooperation failures. That being said, the constructivist approach offers completeness to the analysis that the others (in isolation) do not. Finally, it is interesting to see how cooperation could have been maintained. The realist argument would state that the Afghan, Palestinian and Lebanese states could have augmented their defensive capabilities (in this case, by suppressing the terrorist groups), or built up their offensive arsenals to match the US and Israeli capabilities. The liberalist approach would have been to partake in the assurance game and reassured the US and Israeli states (via international organizations) of their steps to combat local terrorism, or to solve the conflict diplomatically (for example Afghanistan could have handed over Bin Laden to the international courts). Finally the constructivist approach (and as displayed by the new Russia) would have been to reinvent their image on the national stage and in the eyes of the West so they would no longer be perceived as threats to the status-quo<sup>13</sup>. The feasibility of this final step can be argued given the societal and religious constraints prevalent in these nations (which are completely dissimilar to Russia's), but it provides an interesting thought exercise into the alternate methods of avoiding conflict.

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<sup>13</sup> Wendt provides an excellent analysis of the steps taken by Russia in this regard with Gorbachev's policy of "New Thinking". Wendt (1992): 419-422

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