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State-sponsored terrorism as a component of international conspiracy and political engineering

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Abstract

State-sponsored terrorism refers to supporting, financing, or sponsoring terrorist activities by a government or state entity. The United States Department of State (DoS) designates countries that contend to have repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism as state sponsors of terrorism. As of 2023, the list consists of five countries namely; Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. Previously, countries on the list included Iraq, Libya, South Yemen, and Sudan (dos, 2023). State sponsorship of terrorism although not as hegemonic as in past decades. The concept remains a multifaceted phenomenon faced in the international system which the superpower countries are yet to adequately mitigate, despite its threat to national and global security. This paper adopts the desk research approach by reviewing relevant and extant literature gleaned from secondary sources such as published and unpublished materials, journal articles, and the internet. It also examines the notion that state-sponsored terrorism is an act of international conspiracy, as well as political engineering. Findings show that some superpower countries are guilty of being tagged as sponsors of state terrorism as they also use violence as an instrument to protect their national interest, attain their foreign policy dictates, and survive the internal system. Therefore, recommended that Nigeria should effect major changes in its foreign policy towards the development of robust counter-terrorism measures against states capable of sponsoring terrorism within the West African sub-region strengthen its military base, and improve border security to protect its territorial sovereignty.

Keywords: State-Sponsored Terrorism; International Conspiracy; Political Engineering; Counter-Terrorism

1. Introduction

State-sponsored terrorism has its roots in the Cold War era when proxy wars and covert operations were common. The Soviet Union and the United States have supported various insurgent and terrorist groups. The use of terrorist organizations as representations in armed conflicts among state actors became more attractive in the mid-20th century due to post-World War II developments, which manifested in the increasing costs of traditional warfare and the risk of nuclear war. A KGB agent, Alexander Sakharovsky states that, the effect of nuclear capability on the traditional military conflict in today's world when nuclear arms have made military force obsolete, has turned terrorism into the main weapon through which state-sponsored terrorism persists in the post-9/11 era. Other scholars have asserted that it has become less significant in the present era of global jihadism.

Daniel Byman on the other hand argues that its importance has increased and accordingly, terror organizations like Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are heavy beneficiaries of state sponsorship. They get support in the form of funding, weapons, materials, and secure locations which they use for planning and conducting operations (DOS, 2021). State Sponsors of terrorism is a designation by the United States Department of State (DOS) to countries that the

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Department contends to have repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism. As of 2023, the list consists of Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Syria, while countries that were formerly on the list include Iraq, Libya, South Yemen, and Sudan (DOS, 2023). Although state sponsorship of terrorism is not as prevalent as it was in previous decades, it remains a complex issue in the international system. The Superpower nations are yet to adequately address it, despite the ongoing threats it poses to both national and international security. The United States of America's (USA) response to state-sponsored terrorism has two-fold; the offending state is either on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, and therefore subject to a host of economic sanctions, or it is not.

Similarly, a country that has been on the list may be delisted after taking some actions to convince the system (USA) of its resolve to stop the sponsorship or funding of state terrorism. This approach though not seen as effective, the same states have remained on the State Department's list for decades, while some countries, for obvious reasons, have not made the list (Wardlaw, 2001). State sponsors of terrorism offer vital assistance to non-state terrorist organizations as without sponsorship from these states, terrorist groups would experience difficulty in accomplishing their mission as it would be difficult to obtain the funds, weapons, materials, and logistics such as secure areas they require to plan and conduct operations. It has been discovered that most of these countries can manufacture weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and other emerging technologies that could fall into the hands of terrorists to further their nefarious acts. A notable example is Libya's decision in 2003 to renounce terrorism and abandon its WMD programs which led the United States to remove Libya from the list of state sponsors of terrorism in June 2003. Libya subsequently cooperated closely with the US and the international community on its counter-terrorism efforts. Similarly, Sudan took significant steps to also cooperate in the war on terrorism, resulting in both countries being removed from the list (Jewish Virtual Library, 2023). However, Cuba, Iran, and Syria have not taken similar actions to renounce terrorism or combat foreign terrorist organizations. Iran and Syria, in particular, continue to provide safe havens, substantial resources, and guidance to terrorist organizations.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Any prolonged act of terrorism has implications for the international system, especially if it succeeds in achieving the goals of the perpetrators and is capable of affecting international diplomacy. Due to globalization, severe domestic attacks may likely spill across international borders, thus becoming potential triggers of an international conspiracy.

1.1.1. Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to discuss state-sponsored terrorism as a component of international conspiracy and political engineering vis-à-vis the legislation.

2. Methodology

The study adopts desk research through the review of relevant and extant literature gleaned from secondary sources such as published and unpublished materials, journal articles, and the internet.

2.1. Conceptual Clarification

2.1.1. State-Sponsored Terrorism

United Nations (UN) defines state-sponsored terrorism as acts of terrorism conducted by governments directly or by encouraging, and funded by an established government of a state (country) or, terrorism practiced by a government against its own people or in support of international terrorism. The concept of state terrorism is just as contentious as terrorism itself. Terrorism is frequently, though not exclusively, characterized by four main elements: the threat or actual use of violence; a political goal aimed at changing the status quo; the aim to instil fear through dramatic public acts; and the deliberate targeting of civilians. This final element, targeting innocent civilians, presents a challenge when distinguishing state terrorism from other forms of state violence.

Collins (2014) sheds light on state-sponsored terrorism describing it as terrorist violence executed with the active backing of national governments to violent non-state actors. He asserts that states can support terrorist groups through various means, including funding, providing training, supplying weapons, offering logistical and intelligence assistance, and hosting these groups within their borders. The contentious nature of the term means that identifying specific instances often leads to political disputes and varying definitions of terrorism.

Hewitt (2023) contends that state-sponsored terrorism is akin to non-state terrorism as it involves politically, ideologically, or religiously motivated acts of violence against individuals or groups outside of an armed conflict. However, he emphasizes that the crucial difference lies in the fact that these acts are perpetrated by agents of the state.

2.1.2. International Diplomacy

McDermott (1973) postulates diplomacy as the management of relations thus political, security, military, economic, scientific, cultural, etc. between states, and between states and other international actors, such as global or regional organizations, INGOs, transnational corporations, etc., by negotiation. Satow (1979) contends that, diplomacy is an application of tact and intelligence to the conduct of official relations between governments of independent states. Berridge (1995) defines diplomacy as the practice of conducting international relations through negotiation rather than through force, propaganda, legal action, or other peaceful means.

However, Tethloach (2017) critiques this definition, arguing that it has inherent weaknesses. He notes that many definitions of diplomacy assume that the state is the primary actor and that diplomacy primarily involves negotiation. Tethloach contends that diplomacy also encompasses ceremonial functions, information gathering, and image management. Additionally, he argues that defining diplomacy solely as a state activity overlooks the important role of non-state actors in transnational diplomacy.

2.1.3. Political Engineering

The concept of political engineering is a relatively fresh perspective as most of the available studies did not give a clear definition of it. According to Al-Badrany (2019), political engineering is a scientific and methodical technique that is achieved by changing society through political institutions, laws, and processes to design political behaviour in the state, build institutions, establish rules, and chart geopolitically. He contends political engineering as the process of making the necessary adjustments and reforms to the various organs and institutions based on the creation of something new or keeping the old thing existing and not removing it from existence, but re-engineering, reforming, and restructuring the same.

Lax (2002), however, explained the concept differently. He argued that political engineering is the act of designing political institutions in a society, involving the use of paper decrees, in the form of laws, referendums, ordinances, or otherwise, to try to achieve some desired effect within a society.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of state-sponsored terrorism can be analyzed from two theoretical perspectives: The Instrumental Approach and the Organizational Approach. According to the Instrumental Theory, terrorism is a deliberate choice made by a political actor, where the organization as a whole aim to achieve collective goals involving radical changes in political and social conditions. This perspective views terrorism as a response to external aggression, with the resulting violence seen as intentional. Both states and adversaries are analyzed as if they are engaged in a typical conflict, where each party's actions are aimed at influencing the behavior of the other. Alternatively, states may engage in terrorism with the intent to cause harm rather than relying on military strength.

The second approach focuses on the organizational processes of the terrorist group. It is based on the assumption that an act of terrorism is a deliberate choice by a political actor. The organization acts to achieve collective values which involve radical changes in the political and social condition. In other words, some states are deliberately involved in the sponsorship of terrorism for survival, aimed at achieving some political and social objectives. This is further explained in terms of the state or organization's struggle for survival, usually within a competitive environment. The organization responds to pressure from outside by changing the incentives offered to members or through innovation.

2.2.1. Perspectives on States' Sponsorship of Terrorism

Globally, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) leads and coordinates a comprehensive UN approach to preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism. Meanwhile, the United States has been particularly focused on monitoring state sponsors of terrorism through its Bureau of Counterterrorism as far back as in the 1970s. The Bureau's mission which is to enhance U.S. national security plays a lead role in formulating coordinated strategies and approaches to combat terrorism abroad and securing the cooperation of international partners in counterterrorism efforts (DOS, 2023).

The genesis of state-sponsored terrorism as posited by many authors are traced to the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979. The Soviet Union frequently used terrorist organizations to implement its foreign policy during the Cold War. In

response, President Reagan adopted an aggressive stance during the 1980s (Hoffman, 1998). On the contrary, from the mid-1990s, some experts began commenting on a change in the nature of terrorist organizations and international terrorism which they noted is an employ of terrorism been more as an end in itself rather than a means to achieve specific political goals (Hoffman, 1999). This shift led to what would later become "new terrorism" also known as the "lone-wolf" terrorists who operate as individuals or in smaller cells with minimal support from outside as opposed to the hierarchical organizations that often rely on support from some state governments (Hoffman, 2008). A lone-wolf attack also known as a lone-actor attack, is a specific type of mass murder carried out in a public setting by an individual who independently plans and executes the act.

While some scholars argued that the advent of "new terrorism" marginalized state sponsorship, several "new terrorism" advocates continued to assert the prominent role it plays. The ongoing debate about "new terrorism" underscores recent events, such as Afghanistan's support of al Qaeda and the discovery and killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan by US forces. These instances highlight that state sponsorship of terrorism remains a prevalent issue today (Crenshaw, 2008). Three perspectives are always considered while appraising the phenomenon; vis a vis the methods of state sponsorship, the level of involvement between the sponsoring state and the terrorist organization, and the offending state's objectives or motive for providing such platform.

2.2.2. Implications of state-sponsorship of Terrorism

When the U.S. Government designates a country as a sponsor of state terrorism it is due to the repeated support it renders for international terrorist acts. It imposes primary sanctions such as; a ban on arms-related exports and sales of goods or services that could significantly enhance the military capability of the designated country or its ability to support terrorism, prohibitions on economic and financial assistance such as granting of loans by the World Bank and other international financial institutions to the designated country, lifting diplomatic immunity to allow families of terrorist victims to file civil lawsuits in U.S. courts and denying tax credits for income earned in terrorist-listed countries to companies and individuals, denial of duty-free treatment of goods exported to the United States and prohibiting U.S. citizens from engaging in financial transactions with the government of a terrorist-listed country without a Treasury Department license as well as prohibiting Department of Defense contracts above \$100,000 with companies controlled by terrorist-listed states.

3. Discussion and Findings

3.1. The four countries currently designated as state sponsors of terrorism by the U.S.

- **Cuba:** has been accused of publicly opposing the U.S.-led Coalition in the war on terrorism as Cuba has not attempted to track, block, or seize terrorist assets. The Cuban government to date has not engaged in counter-terrorism efforts both in international and regional forums or ever taken action against any designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Accusations abound of providing safe havens to members of terrorist organizations and also maintaining close ties with other state sponsors of terrorism, such as Iran. The Cuba-Iran Joint Commission met in Havana in January 2019 (Jewish Virtual Library, 2023). Although Cuba is yet to extradite suspected terrorists, it demanded that the United States surrender Luis Posada Carriles, whom it accused of plots to kill Castro and bombing a Cuban Airlines plane in 1976, resulting in over 70 deaths. Posada Carriles remained in U.S. custody. The Cuban government instead requested the repatriation of three Cuban Americans implicated in the same cases.
- **Iran:** remains the most active state sponsor of terrorism with its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) being directly involved in supporting, planning, and executing terrorist acts. They continue to render support to various groups especially those who have close links with Palestinian leadership cadres in Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah. These groups use terrorism to achieve its goals. Iran has been accused of playing a significant role in promoting anti-Israeli terrorist activities, both rhetorically and financially. Available evidence suggests that Iran has provided support in terms of funding, training, and provision of weapons to Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist groups, including HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (Jewish Virtual Library, 2023).
- **North Korea:** The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has no known record of sponsoring terrorism since the bombing of a Korean Airlines flight in 1987. However, the DPRK was accused harbouring four Japanese Red Army members who participated in a jet hijacking in 1970s. Also the Japanese government continues to seek a full accounting of the fate of its 12 Japanese nationals believed to have been abducted by DPRK state entities; five such abductees have been repatriated to Japan since 2002. The United States on the

13th February, 2007 in the Initial Actions Agreement, agreed to begin the process of removing the DPRK's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism (Jewish Virtual Library, 2023).

- **Syria:** The Syrian government is alleged to provide funding, political and material support to Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), HAMAS, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), amongst others from their external leadership in Damascus. The Syrian government insists these Damascus-based groups engage only in political and informational activities, but Palestinian terror cells with leaders in Syria have claimed responsibility for anti-Israeli terrorist acts (Jewish Virtual Library, 2023).

4. State-Sponsored Terrorism as an element of International Conspiracy

States often engage in covert operations where they plot in secret against each other. Conspiracies play a significant role in world politics as they are often associated with irrational thinking and delusion. Thus conspiracies should be seen as narratives that are intrinsically linked to power relations and the production of foreign policy knowledge. In their zeal for the protection of national interest and under foreign policy dictates states scheme against each other. Accordingly, states may engage in acts of terrorism directly or indirectly in the international system as an instrument for survival and recognition while also protecting certain socio-economic stances. According to Rotella, in 2008, about 166 persons were murdered as a result of a terrorist attack in the metropolitan city of Mumbai India, the Pakistani-based terrorist group, Lashkare-Taiba was alleged to be responsible for the attack and the situation was further complicated when US agents arrested a former informant for the US Drug Enforcement Administration, David Coleman Headley, as an accomplice. Further investigation showed that the attack and Headley had close connections to the Pakistani intelligence agency. With this revelation, it was expected that Pakistan should immediately make the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. However, the reverse is the case.

Hubbard 2019 asserts that, on 2nd October 2018, a Saudi dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi was assassinated at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul by agents believed to be working for the Saudi government, he was ambushed and strangled by a 15-member squad of Saudi assassins and his body was dismembered and disposed of, his last moments were captured in audio recordings, transcripts of which were subsequently made public. The Saudi government engaged in efforts to cover up the killing by trying to destroy evidence but separate investigations carried out by Turkish officials reviewed that the murder was premeditated. The reports linked some members of the Saudi hit squad to be closely connected to Mohammed bin Salman the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. Despite the overwhelming evidence, the U.S. did not designate Saudi Arabia as a state sponsoring terrorism. To further buttress this, Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military officer and double agent for the British intelligence agencies, and his daughter, Yulia Skripal, were poisoned in the city of Salisbury, England on the 4th of March 2018 apparently by Russian intelligence agents and what connects these two events in 2018 is a concept that receives little attention in wider media and political discourses of state terrorism.

State terrorism is similar to non-state terrorism in that it involves politically ideologically or religiously inspired acts of violence against individuals or groups outside of an armed conflict and the key difference is that agents of the state carry out the violence (Asthana et.al, 2018). State terrorism has an equally long history as far back as the French Revolution and "the terror era." Russian intelligence in the Soviet era a long while deployed murder as a tactic against those deemed as threats to the state or a particular leader the most famous victim of Soviet state terrorism was Leon Trotsky who was murdered in 1940 in Mexico City by agents believed to be working for the Soviet Union and this trend appears to have continued in the post-Soviet era with the deaths of a wide range of critics and opposed to the Russian state and its president, Vladimir Putin (Hewitt, 2023).

The authoritarian states do not have a monopoly on state sponsorship of terrorism. While attempting to stop protests against nuclear tests. the French government agents bombed the Greenpeace ship, The Rainbow Warrior, in New Zealand in 1985, killing 1 person. The Israeli government has spent decades targeting perceived threats such as scientists that are active in Iran's nuclear programme, for death. The American Central Intelligence Agency allegedly sponsored a car bombing in Beirut in 1985 in an effort to kill a cleric connected to Hezbollah. The explosion missed its intended target and murdered 80 people instead. In 1998 a former MI5 agent David Shayler, alleged that MI6 sponsored a 1996 assassination attempt on the then Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. they missed their target and killed several other people instead. It is sufficient to say that state terrorism has a purpose just as non-state terrorism as political scientist Ruth Blakely notes, state terrorism is not only about the destruction of those targeted, but it is also driven by the opportunity afforded to terrorize others. In other words, what unites acts of terrorism is an aspiration to punish and intimidate more widely. Based on recent events, such a desire on the part of a wide variety of states shows no sign of dissipating anytime soon.

Lastly, terrorism is equally considered a tool for political engineering as this assertion is corroborated by Afrasiab Khattak, who claimed that terrorism was the main tool of political engineering against Pashtun nationalists in the general elections of 2008, 2013 and 2018 where Haroon Bilour was targeted to terrorize Pashtuns in order to achieve Iran's political oppression against the Pashtuns who are the eastern Iranian ethnic group that propagates the view that Muslims are not a nation and that ethnic loyalty must come before religious loyalty (Zalmay, 2006).

5. Conclusion

The U.S. policy towards designating a state, sponsor of terrorism could be considered defective, while the process for removing the designation is seen as complicated. For instance, Libya made concerted efforts to show that it had abandoned terrorism but remained on the list until the U.S. extracted unrelated concessions from the government. North Korea, on the other hand, agreed in 2008 to dismantle the Yongbyon facility as part of an aid-for-disarmament deal with the U.S. to remove North Korea from its terrorism blacklist, despite requests from the South Korean government to put North Korea back on the list after it sank the Navy ship, the ROKS Cheonan in 2010. The Obama administration refused to accede to the demand claiming that the act was conducted by only The North Korean military and therefore not an act of terrorism. Meanwhile, the U.S. could be said to have decided to protect its interests despite its affiliation with the South Korean government. This has underscored the notion that state-sponsored terrorism is seen as a ready tool for the achievement of international conspiracy and political engineering. The study thereby proffered the following recommendations:

Recommendations

- The Military, Intelligence, and Law Enforcement (MILE) agencies should enhance their efforts to identify countries in the West African sub-region that may engage in state-sponsored terrorism also strengthen their military capabilities, and improve border security to safeguard their sovereignty.
- Nigeria should implement significant changes in its foreign policy to develop robust counterterrorism measures against states with the potential to sponsor terrorism in the West African sub-region.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

All of the authors have declared that they have all participated in the design, execution, and analysis of the study and that they have approved the final version. Additionally, there are no conflicts of interest in connection with this paper, and the material described is not under publication or consideration for publication elsewhere.

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