

Nationalism From Afar

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[BY SREERAM CHAULIA]

Since the end of World War II, the dominant form of armed conflict has been internal war that is fought within the boundaries of states. Classic inter-state wars have been far and few between compared to the rising tide of intra-state wars, thereby changing the very dynamics and context of large-scale violence. The dictionary of warfare today is loaded with terms like insurgency, counter-insurgency, guerrilla, terrorism, secession and national self-determination.

Yet, the distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘international’ is blurred by the internationalisation of many internal wars. If the most common violent confrontation of our times is between a rebel movement and a state, it is also a pattern that each of these two parties receives external military, economic and diplomatic support. The degrees of internationalisation may vary from one internal war to another, but there is a discernible ‘foreign card’ that each side plays on the other for gaining an advantage in almost every internal war.

During the Cold War, foreign assistance to internal armed conflicts came primarily from governments of states which became notorious for igniting ‘proxy wars’. While an internal war may have its own local bones of contention, foreign states added fuel to the fire in pursuit of their own strategic objectives and priorities. If the intervening foreign states were neighbouring countries, then one witnessed the phenomenon of

‘regionalisation’ of an internal war. If the interveners were great powers with worldwide outreach, then the internal war stood chances of becoming ‘globalised’.

In general, the greater the foreign involvement in an internal war, the more protracted and bloody the conflict tended to become. If one takes the example of Angola, the USA’s all-out championing of the rebel group UNITA pushed the Angolan government to seek Cuban and Soviet help and plunged the country into a devastating three-decade-long war. Vietnam, Afghanistan and Lebanon also underwent prolonged spells of destruction due to globalisation or regionalisation of their internal political conflicts.

With a vast supply line of foreign armaments and funds on both sides of the divide, internal wars attained a ‘balance of power’ despite being asymmetric wars. Typically, the state which is defending its territorial integrity and sovereignty has more resources and force capabilities on hand compared to the rebels. But if violent non-state actors manage to obtain overseas backing, it evens out some of their conventional inferiorities and equips them for a long campaign of attrition.

The dilemma for guerrilla movements is that foreign sponsor states could change their policies due to the dynamic nature of international relations. For instance, at the end of the Cold War, a number of guerrilla groups which had been sustained by American or Russian largesse found their taps running dry. The essential fickleness

of foreign state patrons is not unknown to armed revolutionary organisations, who have bemoaned numerous ‘betrayals’ by their former foreign allies. Given this uncertain mode of external support, guerrillas look to diversify their funding and alliance bases abroad.

Prime among the alternative foreign sources of succour for rebel groups are expatriates from the Diaspora who settle in wealthy countries but have strong emotional affiliations with the self-determination war in their original homeland. Nationalism among refugees and immigrants is centuries-old, but modern technological innovations make it deadlier in contemporary times. The speed and ease with which an international money transfer or remittance can be transacted has upped the value of Diaspora nationalism in internal wars.

The first major case of Diaspora nationalism benefiting a rebel movement after World War II is that of the Irish. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), a militant Catholic movement fighting for independence of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom, set up a sophisticated fundraising infrastructure in north-eastern United States in the 1970s. Radical Irish American Catholics believed fervently that the IRA’s terrorist activities were justified due to the brutal oppression of their co-religionists by Protestant British troops. Without their money streaming into Ulster through bank drafts, couriers and laundering, the IRA would not have

had the firepower to seriously threaten the British state's military occupation. The IRA enjoyed a safe haven in the USA to generate donations and weapons caches because of lax American laws up to the early 1990s that allowed considerable freedom to Diaspora groups engaging in 'political' actions.

The opportunity space for Diaspora nationalism was even more liberal and easy to exploit in Canada, whose multi-cultural ethos and respect for minorities offered a favourite haunt for fundraisers of rebel organisations in South Asia. When the Khalistan insurgency reached its peak in the northern Indian state of Punjab in the 1980s, the Sikh Diaspora in Canada and, to a lesser extent in the UK, emerged as a potent reservoir of militancy. Nostalgic visions of re-establishing the Sikh empire in the Indian subcontinent and boiling anger at the heavy handed military tactics of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi drove wealthy Canadian and British Sikhs into arranging massive propaganda, logistical and financial assistance for banned terrorist outfits like the International Sikh Youth Federation and the Babbar Khalsa International.

As in the case of Irish Americans who stopped bankrolling terrorism in Ulster once a peace process took hold in the late 1990s, the Sikh Diaspora's sympathies for militancy declined as Punjab limped back to normalcy in the nineties. 'Hindu imperialism', which once agitated rich Sikhs in Toronto and Southall into religious rage, lost its appeal by the early 21st century and was replaced by the traditional moderation of the mainstream Sikh Diaspora.

The South Asian rebel group that has truly mastered the art of roping in the Diaspora for fundraising and public relations is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has been fighting for three decades for an independent state of the Tamil minorities of Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan Tamil expatriates living as refugees and immigrants in Canada, Australia and Western Europe are the principal sources of the LTTE's seemingly bottomless treasury which has upheld a world-class fighting unit.

In the formative years of its international network, LTTE solicited contributions from individual businesspersons in the Tamil Diaspora who were highly motivated

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by the separatist cause in Sri Lanka. Later, it resorted to establishing humanitarian front organisations that collected funds in the name of charity for Tamil war victims. The LTTE's 'third generation' modus operandi for overseas fundraising is now said to include business ventures selling prepaid phone cards and satellite television channels in Western countries with large Tamil Diaspora concentrations.

By means of innovative ideas and its legendary secrecy, the LTTE has successfully evaded the dragnet of Western host state restrictions on Tamil Diaspora remittances, which continue to reach the guerrilla group in various guises. As long as the government of India was the LTTE's chief benefactor in the 1980s, the Tamil Diaspora's role as financier of the Eelam wars was not crucial. Ever since New Delhi dropped the LTTE as a hot potato after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, however, the

Diaspora has been the organisation's mainstay in its war against the Sri Lankan state.

A similar change of hands between a foreign state sponsor and a nationalistic Diaspora occurred in the case of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which has spearheaded a violent uprising against Turkey for separate statehood of Kurdish minorities since the 1970s. The PKK was originally financed by Syria, Iran and Greece, who were interested in weakening Turkey. Syrian support lasted up to 1999, after which Damascus cut back its PKK partnership to avoid a Turkish invasion. In 2002, Ankara also entered into an agreement with Iran to ban the PKK as a terrorist organisation.

As the state sponsorship evaporated, PKK turned to the Kurdish Diaspora in Germany, the Benelux countries, and Scandinavia for a stable source of income. It raises around US \$ 9 million from the German Kurdish Diaspora alone and supplements it with a dose of heroin trafficking by expatriate Kurds. Turkey complains of inadequate cooperation from EU states for stemming the PKK's overseas financing mafia and, indeed, the alacrity with which the EU has frozen the tracks of Basque separatists from Spain has not been matched in the PKK's case. Perceptions that Kurdish rebel groups and their Diaspora proponents are fighting for a just cause persist in Western countries and weaken efforts to neutralise them.

Long distance nationalism has proven to be a big propelling factor of high resilience in a number of identity-based internal wars. It thrives on the guilt complex of expatriates in the Diaspora that they might be accused of forsaking their brethren back home who are being mauled by the might of repressive states. With this kind of mindset, the least that immigrants and refugees who have escaped to a comfortable existence in the West can think of doing is to write out cheques for 'liberations' and 'freedom struggles'.

If war has taken on transnational dimensions in the age of instant communication, Diasporas bear their portion of the blame. [📌](#)

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