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Q8(c)

How is terrorism a new form of asymmetrical warfare ? What are some of the challenges in trying to win the war on terrorism ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- How is terrorism a new form of asymmetrical warfare? What are some of the challenges in trying to win the war on terrorism?
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Terrorism offsets military inequality with civilian spectacle and hiding.

It targets the state's monopoly of force and a watching public.

- **Newness:** networks, media, transnational reach.
- **War-on-terror challenges:** no capital, recruitment via repression, emergency law.

The metaphor of winning a war fits states better than cells.

Introduction

Asymmetrical warfare is conflict between unequal military capacities. Terrorism uses spectacular violence against civilians and symbols to offset that inequality. It is "new" in global media reach and networked cells, not in the fact of irregular fear.

Body

Asymmetry

- Regular armies hold territory and uniforms. Terrorist groups hold timing, hiding, and the news image.
- **Max Weber's** state monopoly of legitimate force is the target. The attack seeks a political audience, as Charles **Tilly's** violence-as-politics reminds us.
- **Newness:** transnational finance, encrypted media, and cities as stages, after 9/11 as a world event.

Challenges of a "war on terrorism"

- The enemy is a network, not a capital to occupy. Michels-style organisation can be cellular.
- Winning hearts sits against profiling that produces **labelling** and new recruits, a Mertonian unanticipated consequence.
- Democracies risk emergency laws that thin civil society, which Gramsci would read as coercive substitution for hegemony.
- Distinguishing insurgency, communal riot, and terrorism is a political act, not a clean file.

Limit of the war metaphor

- Wars end with surrender. Terror campaigns can pause, split, and rename.
- Development, honour, and foreign policy sit outside a purely military win.

Flow diagram

State army -> Asymmetry
Terror network -> Asymmetry
Media spectacle -> Terror network
War metaphor -> No capital to take

Conclusion

Terrorism is asymmetrical because the weak use civilian spectacle against the strong state's monopoly of force. Media and networks make the form newly global. Winning a war on terrorism is challenged by cells without capitals, by recruitment through repression, and by the mismatch of war language with a political-network problem.

Facts & figures

Weber

State as monopoly of legitimate physical force; terrorism contests that claim in public.

Tilly

Collective violence as a form of political claim-making, not mere chaos.

Asymmetry

Conflict where capacities and rules of engagement are radically unequal.

Labelling

Becker: tags can stabilise a deviant career; profiling can feed the same loop.