

Terrorism

Second Pass

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Definitional Issues

1. The U.S. Department of State defines terrorism as premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub national groups or clandestine agents, intended to influence an audience.
2. The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines terrorism as: The unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.
3. Cranmer (2005b) and Koch and Cranmer define terrorism as the *deliberate use of violence or the threat of violence against a non-combatant population for purposes of achieving a political end*. Given the brilliance of these works, I support this definition.

There are two fairly distinct types of terrorism: ethno-national terrorism and what I will call ‘irrational’ terrorism. Each warrants individual treatment.

Ethno-National Terrorism (ENT)

1. Ethno-national terrorism is characterized by a clear goal, objective, or finish line.
2. The key motivational question becomes: “how is indiscriminate violence linked to the attainment of an ENT goal?”

The Theoretical Challenges of Understanding ENT

1. IR theory is in a better place to deal with ENT; we are able to apply many of our “usual” tools to the problem.

- (a) *Realism*: Realism is in a poor position to deal with ENT because it assumes state primacy and power struggle. It is not difficult to expand realism in the context of terrorism to include the terrorist group (a non-state actor) into the analysis. Rather, the serious weakness of realism in this context is that a terrorist group cannot (reasonably) be assumed to be attempting to balance a state; nor can one really conceive of a security dilemma between an ENT group and a state.
- (b) *Liberalism*: Liberalism gets closer to the mark in that it takes non-state entities into account, but since terrorist groups (mostly) do not belong to institutions, trade with the target government and the like, the strong points of liberalism do not apply so much to the ENT problem.
- (c) *Constructivism*: Constructivism gains theoretical leverage on the problem by addressing issues of identity and shared meaning that can unite a EN group and differentiate them from their out-group. The major weakness of the constructivist approach, as I see it, is that it is very difficult to operationalize given that, despite its prevalence over the past 50 + years, surprisingly little is known about terrorism.
- (d) *Rational Choice*: Given the (distressing) lack of knowledge, data, and quality scholarship about terrorism, rational choice seems like the most promising approach to the ENT problem to me. Pape (2003) and Crenshaw (1998) have found some empirical support for the claim that terrorist groups behave as rational actors; this support is dampened in Pape’s case by poor research design (selection on the dependent variable).

Theoretically, however, the assumption of rationality makes sense in the ENT case because ENT groups seek to extract a concession or set of concessions from a state. Since we know what they want and how they intend to get it (terrorist violence), we can model their actions and decisions in terms of expected utility.

While this approach has an obvious and non-trivial weakness in that it can, at best predict (**can work in content from the rationality outline here**), it seems like the best we can do

given a weak qualitative and weaker quantitative understanding of the phenomenon. Given the challenges of analyzing such a phenomenon, the rational approach has been used to some gain by: Arce and Sandler (2002); Bueno de Mesquita (2005a, Forthcoming, 2005c,b); Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson (2004); Chai (1994); Cranmer (2005a); Sandler (2003); Sandler and Enders (2004, 2002); Sandler et al. (1983).

2. Empirical work on the ENT phenomenon is sparse. The problem with the existing empirical literature on terrorism is that, while we have decent outcome data, there is a (almost complete) lack of useful covariates. As such, the empirical literature has been restricted to using macro-level covariates (i.e. GDP) as regressors on terrorist outcomes.

Still, this literature has yielded some information to help understand the phenomenon. Li and Schaub (2004) found that trade is a strong predictor of states being the targets of terrorism; this is not a terribly shocking finding given that the most powerful and most globally involved states are the heaviest traders. Koch and Cranmer found that politically left democracies are more likely to be attacked by terrorists than governments of the political right. A more complex model of why the Koch and Cranmer result might be can be found in Cranmer (2005b)

3. The question of “what is the most appropriate counterterrorist strategy” has been raised many times in the literature and many have attempted to answer it. Given the current context however, it seems off topic to go into policy matters; I will stick to the relationship between terrorism and IR theory.

“Irrational” Terrorism (IT)

1. “Irrational” Terrorism (IT), is characterized by vague and amorphous goals and a loose connection between the violence employed by group and the goals they hope to attain; so much so that a link is difficult to draw.
2. Examples of such groups would be Al Qaida, the Italian Red Brigades, or Bader-Mainhoff...
3. The theoretical challenge is different because there is no goal or finish line, nothing to indicate that the goal has been attained. You get

very vague goals and it becomes difficult to apply the usual frame of thinking. Therefore, we cannot establish a causal link between what his being done and what the end goal is.

4. **Without a clear definition of a set of goals which signify success, it is impossible to link instrumentality to objective.**

The Theoretical Challenges of Understanding Irrational Terrorism

1. We need to answer “why is it worth tremendous human costs for something which is so poorly defined?” There are a few ways to approach this problem:

- (a) **Frustration-Aggression/Relative Deprivation:** This is basically a psychological approach to the IT phenomenon. Frustration breeds violence without objective. Aggression provides its own relief; it has nothing to do with the target, it is just cathartic.

Relative deprivation theory: Three ways expectations about entitlement and deprivation have been defined in the literature: (1) reference groups, i.e. police and fire; (2) with regard to your own past; past trends form your future expectations, this is how you form an “attainment gap;” (3) Galtung (1964) says feelings of deprivation arise when one has inconsistent rankings: i.e. high education but low salary; if one is uniformly low, they there is not much of a problem, but inconsistent rankings breed dissatisfaction. Relative deprivation is not the same thing as aggression. With relative deprivation, individuals just want the situation remedied (a very specific objective), with frustration-aggression, one does not have such a specific objective. Relative deprivation, though it is usually quite specific, may apply to IT in the more general sense: individuals want the inequality between, say, the Muslim and Western worlds equalized. This may result in a very amorphous anger at inequality.

- (b) **Yes there is a goal:** Some might argue that there is in fact a goal to IT, but we have not recognized it for what it is. Perhaps the goal is simply to establish a clear identity. Their acts bring them into crystal sharp relief. Constructivism would probably play a large role in explicating this type of theory.
- (c) **Clash of Civilizations:** Mousseau (2003) posits that IT is due to a clash of market (read Western) civilization with the clientelist

civilization of the Muslim world. He sees the amorphous goals as more rallying slogans than anything else; the terrorists feel that they are defending their way of life from our civilization. I suppose when you really want an entire civilization to have nothing to do with a large segment of the world, the complaints of Al Qaida about Americans in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, etc. . . serve more to point out specific instances than define actual goals.

- (d) **My view:** I don't think any one of the above approaches suffices, nor am I prepared to claim that any of them is false. Rather, it seems to me that there is a (largely) omitted parameter in this debate. Leaders who end up (by whatever means) being terrorist leader, whether rich or poor, get rents and utility from maintaining power just as the leader of a nation does. Therefore, the desire for political survival is a crucial component of this problem. The Bueno de Mesquita et al. (1999, 2003) applies here as well.

2. Relative power (or other typical realist theories) do not really apply here. One of two things must occur before any power-based argument is relevant: (1) there must be an objective conflict of interest; some zero-sum element, or (2) one player must think that the other has some reason to act against it even in the absence of an objective conflict of interest. For example, if IT group A has a reason to act aggressively externally in the absence of an objective conflict of interest, A may undertake a diversionary campaign.

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