

Constructing terrorism: From fear and coercion to anger and jujitsu politics

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Abstract

Terrorism is commonly defined as violence or threat of violence intended to coerce a government or its citizens. This construction of terrorism blinds analysts and security officials to the diversity of terrorist strategies. It puts one hypothesis about terrorist intent in the very definition of the phenomenon to be explained, and features only one emotional effect of terrorism--fear. But ISIS attacks in Paris point to the importance of a different strategy--to elicit an over-reaction that builds new support for the terrorists (*ujitsu politics*). Consistent with this strategy, research indicates that it is anger rather than fear that is the predominant reaction to terrorist attack, and that anger reactions are associated with more aggressive responses to attack. Focus on fear and coercion is part of a larger blindness to the dynamic of action and reaction in asymmetric conflict that must be understood for effective response to terrorism.

In this paper I review common definitions of terrorism to show the popularity of assuming terrorist intent to coerce through fear, then draw out some of the costs of this assumption for both analysts of terrorism and practitioners of counterterrorism.

Definitions of Terrorism

It is no secret that there has been grave difficulty in finding agreement on a definition of terrorism. It is perhaps more surprising to note the strong convergence of Western definitions toward intent to coerce an audience. Some salient examples of definition are included in this section in order to show this convergence.

Proposed United Nations Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism

"1. Any person commits an offence within the meaning of this Convention if that person, by any means, unlawfully and intentionally, causes:

- (a) Death or serious bodily injury to any person; or
- (b) Serious damage to public or private property, including a place of public use, a State or government facility, a public transportation system, an infrastructure facility or the environment; or
- (c) Damage to property, places, facilities, or systems referred to in paragraph 1 (b) of this article, resulting or likely to result in major economic loss, when the purpose of the conduct, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act."

Owing to disagreement about whether this definition would apply to government forces and government leaders, this definition has been under discussion at the United Nations since 2002.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's *Terrorism Act 2000* defined terrorism as follows:

- (1) In this Act "terrorism" means the use or threat of action where:
 - (a) the action falls within subsection (2),
 - (b) the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public and
 - (c) the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.
- (2) Action falls within this subsection if it:
 - (a) involves serious violence against a person,
 - (b) involves serious damage to property,
 - (c) endangers a person's life, other than that of the person committing the action,
 - (d) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public or
 - (e) is designed seriously to interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system.

U.S. Definitions

Title 22 of the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, Section 2656f(d), defines terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.” The U.S. State Department uses this definition for its yearly reports on terrorist activity.

The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) 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.”

The U.S. Department of Defense defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies. Terrorism is often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs and committed in the pursuit of goals that are usually political."

The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) contains a definition of terrorism: “Terrorism is the use of force or violence against persons or property in violation of the criminal laws of the United States for purposes of intimidation, coercion, or ransom. Terrorists often use threats to:

- Create fear among the public.
- Try to convince citizens that their government is powerless to prevent terrorism.
- Get immediate publicity for their causes.”

The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 defines domestic terrorism as "activities that (A) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the U.S. or of any state; (B) appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and (C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S."

Of these seven definitions of terrorism, six include terrorist motivation to intimidate, coerce, or compel. Only one definition, in the U.S. Code of Federal Regulation, does not refer to intimidation and coercion: “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”

The U.S. CFR definition is remarkably close to Martha Crenshaw’s 1995 definition: “Terrorism is a conspiratorial style of violence calculated to alter the attitudes and behavior of multitude audiences. It targets the few in a way that claims the attention of the many. Terrorism is not mass or collective violence but rather the direct activity of small groups.”

What do terrorists want? To terrorize (of course)

Terror as a tactic of political conflict and political control goes back at least as far as the Romans, who would line roads with crosses bringing agonizing death to ‘bandits’ who today might be called terrorists. Naming this tactic as *terrorism* goes back only to the French Revolution, where the new government embraced killing of aristocrats, clerics, and even peasants loyal to the old regime. “Kill one man, frighten a thousand” may be the shortest description of state terror.

As states through history have used terror to coerce, compel, and intimidate, states facing non-state violence find it obvious that coercion based on fear is what the terrorist threat is about. This easy projection of state motives to terrorist motives must be resisted, however, because it has several unhelpful consequences.

The first consequence is to make terrorist motivations difficult to analyze. When one among many possible motives for a terrorist attack is enshrined in the very definition of terrorism, all other possibilities tend to go aglimmering. For this reason, no social scientist would put a hypothetical explanation of a phenomenon in the definition of the phenomenon of interest. It is perhaps an indicator of the status of social science in government offices that so many government definitions of terrorism make this move. The next section examines a terrorist motivation that is hard to see when starting from a view of terrorism as attempted coercion.

The second consequence of identifying terrorism with coercion is to focus on fear as the key emotion for understanding and resisting terrorism. Terrorists want to terrorize! If the target of terrorist attacks, both the government and its citizens, can resist being intimidated, then the terrorists cannot succeed. And how better to demonstrate the conquest of fear than to strike back against the terrorists, to mobilize new resources to fight terrorism, to strengthen government power to fight terrorism—in short, to declare war on terrorism. Unfortunately terrorists count on anger and outrage at least as much as they count on fear, as will be discussed in the next section.

A third and related consequence of including fear and coercion in government definitions is that citizens are misled about how terrorism is dangerous. This is a mass psychology problem, not a specialist problem. Many who study terrorism, inside government as well as outside, understand that fear and coercion are not the only goals of terrorist attacks. But the citizens who read and hear government definitions of terrorism, especially as these are embodied in the opinions of politicians and pundits, believe that, as long as they do not give in to fear and as long as they support war against terrorists, they have done their best. The next section shows the costs of this misplaced confidence.

Beyond Coercion: Jujitsu Politics

Decades of research have shown that, in small face-to-face groups, outgroup threat leads reliably to increased group cohesion, increased respect for ingroup leaders, increased sanctions for ingroup deviates, and idealization of ingroup norms. In larger groups, reference to cohesion is often replaced with reference to ingroup identification, patriotism, or nationalism, but the pattern in response to outgroup threat is similar to that seen in small groups.

Consider the results of the 9/11 attacks on U.S. politics: increased patriotism visible in rallies, flags, banners, and bumper stickers; polls showing increased support for the president and for every agent and agency of government; increased sanctions for Americans challenging the consensus (Bill Maher sacked for suggesting the 9=11 attackers were not cowards); and reification of American values (“they hate us for our values”).

Consider also the emotions associated with the 9/11 attacks. An innovative study by Back, Kufner, and Egloff (2010) examined emotion words in millions of words of texts sent in the U.S. on September 11, 2001. Anger related words increased throughout the day, ending six times higher than fear and sadness

related words. Experiments described by Wetherell et al (2013) show that individuals responding to images of the 9/11 attacks with anger are more likely to favor aggressive reactions to terrorism, whereas reactions of fear and sadness are related to support for more defensive reactions. Across several studies Wetherell et al find that anger reactions are related to support for attacking terrorist leaders in foreign countries, war against countries harboring terrorists, and outgroup derogation of Arab Americans and Palestinians. In other studies fear reactions were associated with increased support for government surveillance and restriction of civil liberties,

In short, the predominant U.S. reaction to the 9/11 attacks was not fear but anger. Anger is associated with aggression and outgroup derogation; fear is associated with defensive strategies of surveillance and curtailed civil rights. Anger is the emotion sought by terrorists seeking to elicit overreaction to their attacks—using the enemy’s strength against him in a strategy of *jujitsu politics*. The power of this strategy, and the importance of anger reactions in making the strategy successful, are hidden in definitions of terrorism that focus only on fear and coercion.

Al-Qaeda had good reason to be hopeful that jujitsu politics would work for them on 9/11.

In 1986, the U.S. attempted to reply to Libyan-supported terrorism by bombing Libya’s leader, Muammar Qaddafi. The bomb’s missed Qaddafi but hit a nearby apartment building and killed a number of women and children. This mistake was downplayed in the U.S. but it was a public-relations success for anti-U.S. groups across North Africa.

In 1998 the U.S. attempted to reply to al-Qaeda attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa by sending cruise missiles against a weapons factory in Sudan and against al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. It turned out that the weapons factory was making medical supplies—more fuel for anti-U.S. feelings. Worse yet, the cruise missiles landing in Afghanistan blew off the table a deal in which Afghanistan’s Taliban would turn over Usama bin Laden and other of his troublesome Arabs to Saudi Arabia—where the Saudi royals were still smarting from bin Laden’s criticism.

Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri enunciated the strategy of jujitsu politics in his memoir *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*. If the shrapnel of war reach American homes, he opined, Americans must either give up their control of Muslim countries or come out from behind their Muslim stooges to fight for control. If Americans move troops into Muslim countries, he predicted, the result would be a magnet for jihad of the kind the Russians faced in Afghanistan. Although the U.S. war against the Taliban was faster and cleaner of collateral damage to civilians than Al Qaeda had expected, the U.S. move into Iraq did indeed bring out more terrorists, both in Muslim and in Western countries.

More recently, Jujitsu politics is part of the motivation behind the ISIS-sponsored attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, which killed 130 and wounded 367. These attacks left a big question. Why would a group aiming for a Sunni state in Syria and Iraq, a group already under attack by the government forces of Syria, the U.S., the U.K., France, and Russia, mount a terrorist attack in Paris?

Every terrorist attack and every counterterrorist response is a communication to multiple audiences. We need to look at these audiences separately to see the logic of the Paris attacks.

For Sunni Muslims chafing under Shi’a power in Iraq and Syria, the message is power. ISIS can best defend Sunnis because ISIS has the power. For young Sunni men in the Middle East, the message is

“Don’t think about joining ‘moderate’ Sunni rebels, don’t think about joining a local tribal militia, join the winning team — join ISIS.”

For Muslims in Europe there is also a message of power, but more important there is jujitsu politics— ISIS trying to use Western strength against the West. A response to terrorism that creates collateral damage, that harms individuals previously unsympathetic to the terrorists, can bring new status and new volunteers for the terrorists.

This is the result ISIS sought from the Paris attacks. In France and in other European countries ISIS aimed for a government response that will target Muslims with new restrictions and new surveillance. ISIS hoped also for a public reaction against Muslims, and the strengthening of anti-immigrant political parties, not only in France but in other European countries. They wanted increased discrimination and hostility aimed at European Muslims.

In short, ISIS looked and is still looking for European reactions to push European Muslims toward joining in the construction of a new Caliphate. There are more than 20 million Muslims living in the European Union. So far perhaps 2,000 have traveled to Syria to join ISIS. Jujitsu politics can bring more volunteers, more home-grown terrorists, and more security costs for European countries.

Will it work? Political speeches and newspapers are full of war talk. French forces have joined with U.S. forces in more bombs dropped on the ISIS controlled areas of Syria and Iraq. As ISIS tries to blend in with civilians, the escalation of bombing means escalation of collateral damage.

In France new powers of investigation and detention are being advanced for police and security forces. These will be felt more in Muslim immigrant neighborhoods than elsewhere.

Perhaps the most dangerous force for hostility and discrimination is the definition of the enemy as "fundamentalist Muslims." Marine LePen, leader of an anti-immigrant party in France, offered this target in an interview with NPR's Robert Siegel: "...we must eradicate Islamic fundamentalism from our soil."

Siegel did not challenge LePen's definition of the problem. But the fact is that the great majority of Islamic fundamentalists are devout rather than political. Defining religious ideas and religious practice as the enemy will attack ninety-nine peaceful Muslims for every jihadist reached. Jujitsu politics will be winning.

Counterterrorism: A dynamic perspective

Jujitsu politics points to the importance of action and reaction in the conflict between terrorists and their targets. Overreaction to terrorist attack produces its own reaction in escalated sympathy and support for terrorist violence. In turn terrorists escalate their attacks or broaden their targets. This is a progression of action and reaction in a trajectory of escalating violence over time.

To understand terrorism is to understand this trajectory. It is not possible to understand or anticipate terrorist actions without understanding how they see and respond to government actions. Studying the terrorists ‘out there’ is a mirage; they do not exist out there, they exist in a dynamic relation with us, their targets. This is a very difficult perspective for those charged with fighting terrorism, just as it is difficult for police charged with implementing community policing. To get into the mind of a terrorist

can make it more difficult to shoot one. To get into the mind of a terrorist can raise doubts about what we, the terrorists' targets, may have done to instigate terrorist attack.

Returning now to the popularity of definitions of terrorism that assume that terrorists aim to terrorize, it becomes clear how this definition of terrorist motivation blinds analysts, officials, and citizens alike to the danger of overreaction. If terrorists want to coerce us with fear, then we will be safe so long as we are not intimidated and fight back, we are safe. But if we are not safe when we do not see the power in the dynamics of interaction; we give this power to the terrorists, who are happy that the more powerful cannot see their strongest weapon.

Why are we thus blinded? Definition of terrorism as an attempt to coerce with fear is part of the answer, but itself requires explanation. What is the attraction of a definition that appears ignorant or bizarre to any practicing social scientist? I am suggesting here that our blindness is not an accident of asymmetric conflict, or an accident of being strong enough to afford not thinking. Rather ours is a motivated blindness. Not seeing the interaction saves our self-image as blameless victims and eases our way to violence in return: not just boots on the ground but assassinations from the air and torture in our prisons. Seeing a conflict as interaction humanizes the enemy where heroic resistance to fear and coercion makes monsters.

Here it is useful to note the strong parallel between counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006) gives close attention to the insurgent strategy that aims to mobilize new support by eliciting government overreaction to insurgent attacks. The need to counter this strategy of jujitsu politics comes through in the first five *Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency Operations* (pp. 47-51).

1. Sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be.
2. Sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is.
3. The more successful the counterinsurgency is, the less force can be used and the more risk must be accepted.
4. Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction.
5. Some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot.

Insurgency and terrorism are forms of political conflict. Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism are thus forms of political conflict. Mao Zedong's slogan is perhaps the shortest summary of the road to success for both counterinsurgency and counterterrorism: Politics takes command! For analysts of terrorism and practitioners of counterterrorism, a more political and interactive perspective may require changing the definition of terrorism that focuses only on fear and coercion.

Conclusions

Possible Note Added in Proof: Outbidding--Another terrorist intent hidden beneath the focus on fear and coercion, but evident in relation to the competition of ISIS and al-Qaeda attacks in Paris and Nigeria.

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