

Introduction

Constructions of Terrorism

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Constructions of terrorism emanate from a wide range of sources. Governments and international organizations create criminal laws and administrative lists defining who is a terrorist or what acts constitute terrorism. In society, discussions among its members and the press play a major role in how the words *terrorism* and *extremism* are used and applied, which in turn influences public understanding and government policy. Terrorist groups themselves contribute to these constructions through the rationales and justifications they use for their actions. Today we are seeing the continual reference to terrorism in everyday language, government policy, news reporting, and international diplomacy and from various groups and uprisings.

With the term being used to describe a wide range of violence, it is difficult to formulate effective government responses aimed at prevention and eradication. It further makes things difficult in societal settings for creating conducive environments for reconciliation. This volume seeks to establish appropriate research frameworks for understanding how we construct understanding(s) of terrorism. From the perspective of countering terrorism and extremism, if there is not a well-developed understanding of the object of these frameworks, they will not be effective.

Assessments of the literature of terrorism have revealed consistent and troubling shortcomings. Lum, Kennedy, and Sherley and Andrew Silke carefully examined studies of terrorism published over the previous decades and the great explosion of terrorism research after 9/11.¹ The most germane findings about terrorism and counterterrorism research in their two studies help frame the contributions that have been reviewed here.

The first finding is that most of the publications on terrorism have been contributions by scholars who were relatively new to the subject. These scholars discovered terrorism as a problem, usually after a particularly

spectacular and unexpected event, offered a solution for how to respond to terrorists and terrorism, and never returned to the study of terrorism. Indeed, Silke found that 83 percent of the publications on terrorism were authored by people who published just one article on the subject.² These scholars had not invested the time to discover what research had already been done—either by scholars engaged in the study or by previous groups of terrorists or policy makers responding to terrorism.

The second key finding is that most of the scholarly work on terrorism, reflecting the prevalent, one-off approach, has not been interested in the hard work of theory building. The vast majority of the scholars who have investigated terrorism have not approached their research with the purpose of developing theoretically grounded studies, and consequently they have not applied positivist research methods to its study. This has been a consistent finding of reviews of the “state of the art” for the past three decades. As Schmid and Jongman argued: “Perhaps as much as eighty percent of the literature is not research-based in any rigorous sense.”³ As a result, Schmid and Jongman concluded, “much of the writing in the crucial areas of terrorism research . . . is impressionistic, superficial, and at the same time also pretentious, venturing far reaching generalisations on the basis of episodal evidence.”⁴ Ariel Merari concurred: “By and large, terrorism literature is composed mainly of studies which rely on relatively weak research methods.”⁵ Ted Gurr also agreed, arguing that, “with a few clusters of exceptions there is, in fact, a disturbing lack of good empirically-grounded research on terrorism.”⁶ The consequence, as Merari wrote in 1991, is that terrorism research “resembles hearsay rather than twentieth century science”; and that, he added, “may well be an understatement.”⁷

Writing in 2014 about the surge of money and research on terrorism since the September 11, 2001, terror attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., Marc Sageman commented: “After all this funding and this flurry of publications, with each new terrorist incident we realize that we are no closer to answering our original question about what leads people to turn to political violence. The same worn-out questions are raised over and over again, and we still have no compelling answers. It seems that terrorism research is in a state of stagnation on the main issues. How did this state of affairs arise?”⁸ Sageman argues that the roots of the lack of progress lie both in the questions being asked and in the lack of data to pursue them. As he indicates, one set of questions centers on the psychological: Why do they hate us? What is the terrorist personality? Both questions eventually give way to a process approach to becoming a terrorist and searching for recruitment devices both in the new media and in personal charismatic figures. In addition to the shortcoming of

these approaches, Sageman also bemoans the lack of appropriate data for studying these questions; much of the data that exist, he believes, is in the hands of government agencies whose analysts simply do not exploit them, because they lack the concepts, time, and ability necessary to do so. A serious impediment to scholars, whether fully dedicated to terrorism studies or only occasionally participating in them, is the lack of comprehensive and reliable data. We note that in what follows, scholars are now finding relevant and helpful data and are applying analytical methods to them.

In 2016 the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* dedicated an issue to debating a recent modification of David Rapoport's "Four Wave" theory. Rapoport asserted, in an influential 2001 journal article and volume chapter, that modern terrorism can be collected into four "waves," the first of which began in Russia and Eastern Europe at the close of the nineteenth century; the fourth, religious wave predominates today.⁹ Tom Parker and Nick Sitter advanced an alternative framework, according to which, rather than consecutive waves, each with a definable beginning and end, terrorism has come in four specific strains or "chains" that extend through its modern history.¹⁰ The ensuing debate seriously challenged the "strain" model.¹¹ Perhaps confirming in part the criticisms made by Silke, Merari, and Gurr noted above, the discussion was entirely qualitative, and the theory Parker and Sitter introduced relied on selected anecdotal evidence; further, Parker and Sitter had published very little on terrorism prior to their "strains" theory. Separately, in 2010 Jeffrey Kaplan suggested his own modification of Rapoport's wave theory, arguing that presently a fifth wave of terrorism, which he called tribalism, is developing, and Rapoport's fourth, "religious" wave has crested and broken.¹²

Also in 2016, the journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* dedicated an issue to data and measurement used in the study of terrorism. Introducing the special issue, Joshua Freilich and Gary LaFree observed:

Recently, scholarly interest in terrorism has increased and systematic methods are now more commonly used. Importantly though, terrorism works continue to lag behind related fields of study in the analysis of data and the adoption of sophisticated research methods. The few terrorism works that do analyze data highlight substantive findings as opposed to measurement issues. A study's substantive findings are only meaningful though if it correctly addresses the measurement issues that invariably arise during the research process. In other words, while the quality of terrorism research has greatly improved in recent years, measurement issues have been under explored and researchers could do more in this area to further improve the field's rigor.¹³

Articles in the issue attack issues of measurement and data collection, from the use of official statistics, victim reports, interviews, and open-source

databases such as International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITATE) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The collection of articles is a thorough catalogue of the state of the art in quantitative research in the study of terrorism.

One may conclude, therefore, that though the study of terrorism has benefited from increased rigor, greater access to reliable data, and more funding and attention, there is still work to be done. Indeed, the study of terrorism benefits from a wide variety of methods, different approaches by a diverse set of disciplines, and the attention of academics and policy makers alike. The chapters that follow represent a sample of that diversity.

THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF TERRORISM PROJECT

TRENDS Research & Advisory, an Abu Dhabi–based independent research center, and the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, announced a partnership in the summer of 2015 in order to focus on “constructions of terrorism.” Occupying considerable space in the daily awareness of people across the globe, terrorism is nevertheless an elusive concept, falling prey to politicization, loose definition, and lack of context. In some ways terrorism has been described as whatever a person wants it to be, which often gives it an outsized role in public opinion and policy demands. The Constructions of Terrorism Project (COTP) seeks to approach this slippery concept from multiple directions, employing a variety of research methodologies emanating from many academic disciplines and policy-making perspectives.

The goal is to thoroughly explore the many ways in which terrorism is constructed by academics, political leaders, the public, and those who employ terror to get what they want. The COTP does not intend to solve the problem of defining terrorism by somehow exceeding the scholastic efforts of other research projects, or to fully reconcile divergent approaches to the theoretical concept. It does, however, seek to provide a forum in which the diversity of conceptual understandings of terrorism can be collectively interrogated, based on the belief that from the high ground of a more thorough, rigorously investigated understanding of terrorism, more effective means of confronting terrorism can be developed and implemented.

STUDYING TERRORISM FROM MANY PERSPECTIVES

The scholars and their contributions assembled here are distinguished both within their own fields and within the community of scholars of terrorism.

Almost all have devoted a great deal of their scholarly attention to the problem, and most have done so for more than a decade and, in some cases, for much longer than that. The contributors differ in the ways they approach terrorism as a problem. They represent a number of very different scholarly fields and backgrounds: sociology, political science, communication, criminology, psychology, religious studies, history, and law. While there are many points of disagreement among these contributions (e.g., the construction of the problem and the various possible responses that policy makers and publics might have and make), there are also many points of overlap and agreement. All of the contributors reject a one-size-fits-all approach to the problem of characterizing those who use terrorism or those who are responsible for responding to terrorist violence. All are interested in exploring the similarities and differences among the perpetrators, the policy maker responses, and public reactions and assessments.

First, constructing terrorism is, in part, an introspective process, requiring an examination not just of terrorists and what they do but also of what is done to them before and after they decide to act. Acts of terror and terrorists themselves are embedded in both a local and a global political system. In chapter 1, Lisa Stampnitzky suggests that there would be no definition of terrorism without counterterrorism. Rather than a dearth of definitions for terrorism, there is actually a plethora, making selection the real problem. Stampnitzky suggests that the best definition of terrorism is how it is defined in practice; thus, counterterrorism “defines” terrorism.

Sometimes definitions of terrorism can be too inclusive, or constructed in such a way as to exaggerate its potential for damage. John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart have long held that the threat of terrorism has been exaggerated, with the consequence that phenomena like civil war and insurgency are being redefined as “terrorism.” As a result, as they discuss in chapter 2, people overestimate their own risk of falling victim to terrorist violence, which in part fuels overreaction by government agencies. Central to Mueller and Stewart’s argument is the widespread tendency to “over-hype” the threat of terrorism.

Constructing terrorism means also constructing the institutional responses to terrorist violence. David H. Schanzer approaches the topic from a legal perspective in chapter 3. Terrorism is a tactic, one that can be used by anybody. Political expression can take many forms; even the use of violence to advance a political objective entails choices. What sets terrorism apart from other forms of violence is its intentional violation of the laws of war. Schanzer concludes that understanding terrorism as a tactic—akin to tactics like conventional warfare or murder for hire—and ridding us of particularly

useless concepts like a “war on terror” or even “counterterrorism” will help bring clarity to the current sprawl of post-9/11 security policy.

In chapter 4, Ruth Blakeley challenges the commonly held position that widening the definition of terrorism to include state violence fruitlessly muddies an already murky phenomenon, making further study difficult. States can and do use terror in aid of their own political projects, she contends. She first interrogates scholarly and policy approaches to state terrorism, then moves to describe some incidents that, she claims, represent state terror, and concludes by advancing some consequences of excluding state terrorism from the study of terror more generally.

The best understanding of terrorism situates an act of violence within its unique political environment, in which there are multiple actors; to focus on the actions of terrorists alone is to perceive only part of the phenomenon. This is vividly described by Mark Juergensmeyer in chapter 5, where he explains that focusing on the perpetrators of violence alone is like trying to understand the moves of a boxer in a ring who is fighting an invisible opponent. One boxer’s moves are comprehensible only with reference to the other boxer’s actions. The suicidal act of flying airplanes into buildings, for example, can make sense only when one understands that the perpetrators and planners of that act believed themselves to be engaged in an apocalyptic cosmic battle of good versus evil.

In fact, terrorist violence may be conducted with the objective of eliciting a specific reaction. Clark McCauley, in chapter 6, argues that “*jujitsu politics*” is designed to use the overwhelming power of targeted states against themselves. According to his research, acts of terror elicit an anger emotional response that is stronger than fear and intimidation. As McCauley argues here: “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 aiming 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, is hidden by definitions of terrorism that focus only on fear and coercion.” The reaction itself is part of the larger strategy employed by terrorists. It is therefore impossible to disentangle the act of terrorist violence from the type of response it elicits; there are always at least two participants in an act of terrorism.

Benjamin Smith, Scott Englund, Andrea Figueroa-Caballero, Elena Salcido, and Michael Stohl provide in chapter 7 the results of a quantitative examination of more than 110,000 print newspaper articles. They find that “al-Qaeda” was the most symbolically meaningful name used to describe terrorism over

the past eighteen years. In fact, in 60 percent of the articles, there was no reason for al-Qaeda to be mentioned, except as a way to help define some other terror group. The implication is that applying an “al-Qaeda” frame so broadly likely paints an erroneous veneer of solidarity over terrorist groups and actions that in fact belong to their own unique political milieus.

While terrorism is tricky to define, and different definitions lead to different responses, the concept of radicalization has become perhaps even thornier. Anthony Richards argues in chapter 8 that in the United Kingdom, the concepts of “terrorism, radicalization, and extremism” are being merged in unhelpful, and perhaps counterproductive, ways. He explains that in the United Kingdom, “there is an increased *wider* concern with the way citizens think ideologically—a broader view that if they believe in certain *nonviolent* dogmas said to be ‘conductive’ to terrorism, they are part of the ‘terrorist problem,’ even if they deplore the violent methods of al-Qaeda and ISIS.”

In chapter 9, Richard Falk draws attention to the logically dangerous approach of using the term *terrorism* to signify a particular actor (usually one with whom one disagrees) rather than the nature of the violence itself. Focusing on actors invites selective use of the term; thinking about the act itself helps to situate it in its political context. By providing context, appropriate measures can be taken to provide durable security. The contemporary security environment requires new thinking. Falk concludes that “neither the war nor the crime paradigm is adequate to encompass the specific character of the security challenge posed by the 9/11 attacks on US targets or the Paris massacre of November 13, 2015, or any of the other kindred happenings since the year 2000.” These new challenges require a nuanced approach that anticipates responses to counterterrorism efforts. “Reconfiguring a security paradigm that captures the distinctiveness of such events,” Falk argues, “is needed to avoid policies that kill and devastate without contributing to improved security.” Crafting such an innovative counterterrorism strategy is likely to present significant challenges to domestic civil liberties in Western societies, international legal traditions, intelligence collection and analysis, and even the institution of international sovereignty.

The traumatic events of September 11, 2001, and subsequent high-profile incidents of terrorist violence have resulted in an expanding body of law (both domestic and international) that addresses terrorism. Richard Burchill argues in chapter 10 that although a proliferation of laws concerning terrorism may allow governments to intervene earlier to disrupt terrorist planning, real improvements in security have not occurred:

There is no doubt that states are required, and expected, to provide security for their citizens and others, but we have to ask if the legal regimes constructed for addressing terrorism are effectively achieving the objective of creating more security. Despite the fact that governments have been addressing the threat to security caused by terrorism for a considerable period of time, calls continue for more laws as the solution to improve security.

Burchill concludes that the expanding volume of law addressing the crime of terrorism is itself a dangerous overreaction. Rather than producing more security—a central duty of any state—terrorism law has become a symbolic act in response to an emotionally weighty crime. The result is to criminalize more and more behavior with no attending increase in security, and to grant security services ever greater authority without producing more effectiveness.

The multitude of ways one can define terrorism, including diverse sets of actors and actions, can affect how one studies the phenomenon itself. Rachel Levin and Victor Asal suggest in chapter 11 that although a great deal of intellectual effort has been devoted to defining terrorism by focusing on who is targeted in a particular act of violence, “this topic has not led to an investigation of whether or not different constructs of the target would yield different causes of terrorism.” Levin and Asal suggest that the question may be addressed by testing the Global Terrorism Database to determine whether different operationalizations of the concept of terrorism (at least with respect to who is targeted by terrorist violence) would produce different correlations and causal relationships that would illuminate the dynamics of terrorism. They conclude: “Different definitions of terrorism do not seem to be generating very different causal stories. This suggests that while the ethical arguments related to how we construct the definition of terrorism are important, the basic explanations of extreme violent attacks at the country level of analysis are simply not that different, regardless of the target.”

In chapter 12, Stefan Malthaner and Lasse Lindeskilde present two alternative constructions of the “lone actor” terrorist. Rather than being isolated and entirely independent, they explain, these individuals are usually, at least tangentially, part of a wider movement. In one construction, which they label the peripheral drifter pathway, the individual is partially embedded in semi-radical friendship groups and weakly connected to wider radical milieus. While never becoming a part of a radical group, the peripheral drifter drifted in the margins, weakly considering but then again dropping plans to join jihad abroad. In a second pathway, the failed joiner tries to connect to radical groups, succeeds in making contact, but is

rejected or expelled. Thus forced to function outside the group, this individual decides to act alone.

Mia Bloom, in chapter 13, argues that to understand the construction of terrorism, we should examine how martyrdom is celebrated in the larger society and how youth are convinced that they can do far more with their death than they could with their life. Her chapter examines how the most vulnerable in a society take part in acts of terrorist violence and are convinced that martyrdom is an altruistic act. Bloom insists that so-called child terrorists “are not born; rather they are made and learn to *want* to be a part of a violent extremist group, either with or without the knowledge and support of their parents and families.” This culture of martyrdom instills in young people an extreme appreciation for the afterlife and teaches them to value their own death more than life itself. Religious sanction for suicidal action comes with promises of religious reward for both martyrs and their families. The chapter examines various elements of “cultures of martyrdom” by comparing *jihadi* examples with *thatkodai* in Sri Lanka (among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE).

The Government Actions in Terror Environments (GATE) data set is introduced and discussed by Laura Dugan and Erica Chenoweth in chapter 14. Dugan and Chenoweth argue that government actions beyond what is explicitly described as counterterrorism can affect the behavior of terrorist groups. They conclude by arguing that counterterrorism analysis should “reconsider we can conceptualize counterterrorism to include more nuanced behavior by governments that could elicit a reaction from terrorist organizations or their constituencies. By expanding how we construct counterterrorism, we are better able to develop insight into what works and what does not work in different contexts.”

Properly constructing a terror threat is essential to creating effective countermeasures. Englund and Stohl argue in chapter 15 that when distinct constructions, or facets, of the contemporary threat presented by Daesh are conflated, the response to that threat is bound to be muddled and ineffective. Fighting an insurgent army abroad may have little in common with detecting domestic terror threats. In fact, applying the wrong policy prescription to a particular facet of a complex problem may be counterproductive. “Bombing Daesh fighters in Raqqa,” Englund and Stohl note, “will not make Parisians more secure; killing individual Daesh leaders is not likely to liberate Mosul; screening refugees more carefully will not solve the crisis that displaced them.” They conclude that “properly demarcating the various distinguishable facets of a terrorist threat is a necessary, but not sufficient, step toward effectively countering that threat.”

The purpose of this collection of essays is to further develop our understandings of terrorism through multidisciplinary approaches. While we do not wish to overstate the threat from terrorism, the scale of events around the world point toward the need for more effective understanding of the phenomena categorized as terrorism. There is no clear path to preventing and eradicating violence and extremism; however, more effective responses are needed globally. Our objective with this collection is to contribute to the formulation of more effective responses through a better understanding of how we construct understandings of terrorism.

NOTES

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2. Silke, "An introduction to research on terrorism."
3. A. Schmid and A. Jongman, *Political terrorism: A new guide to actors, authors, concepts, data bases, theories, and literature* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1988), 219.
4. *Ibid.*, 177.
5. Cited in *ibid.*, 179.
6. T. Gurr, "Empirical research on political terrorism: The state of the art and how it might be improved," in R. Slater and M. Stohl, eds., *Current perspectives on political terrorism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 2.
7. A. Merari, "Academic research and government policy on terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3 (1991): 95, 220.
8. Marc Sageman, "The stagnation in terrorism research," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014): 569.
9. David C. Rapoport, "The fourth wave: September 11 and the history of terrorism," *Current History* 100 (2001): 419–24; Rapoport, "The four waves of modern terrorism," in Audrey Kurth Cronin and James Ludes, eds., *Attacking terrorism: Elements of a grand strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 46–73.
10. Tom Parker, and Nick Sitter, "The four horsemen of terrorism: It's not waves, it's strains," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28:2 (2016): 197–216.
11. Jeffrey Kaplan, "A strained criticism of Wave Theory," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28:2 (2016): 228–35; David C. Rapoport, "It is waves, not strains," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28:2 (2016): 217–24; Charles Townshend, "Wave and strain," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28:2 (2016): 225–27.
12. Jeffrey Kaplan, *Terrorist groups and the new tribalism* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
13. Joshua D. Freilich, and Gary LaFree, "Measurement issues in the study of terrorism: Introducing the special issue," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39 (2016): 569–79.