**The effectiveness of terrorism**

Far less attention has been directed at questions of terrorism’s outcomes than to issues of mobilisation and causation. As such, there is much still to learn about how terrorism produces particular effects, and indeed, on how terrorism ends.

One of the central questions in work on terrorism’s effectiveness is that of the most appropriate metric. If terrorism is conceptualised as a strategy to achieve substantive political change, as we will see, it is largely ineffective. If, however, terrorism is primarily interpreted as a communication strategy, then one could argue it is very often a success. Informed by the dominance of the strategic model in accounts of political violence (Abrahms, 2008), to date, studies have largely taken political change as the key metric, as such, this measure dominates the discussion that follows.

Assuming terrorism adheres to a strategic logic, it remains necessary to specify the mechanisms by which terrorism’s effects are wrought, an area that is somewhat under-theorised. Perhaps the most coherent theory of change has been presented by Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walters (2006) who argue terrorism is a form of costly signalling. Given their relative weakness, militant groups use violence to change their audience’s perception about their capacity to impose costs and commitment to their goals. As part of this, militants are presumed to use five strategies: attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding, (Kydd & Walter, 2006). After a review of work interpreting the political outcomes of militant groups, these various strategies organise the discussion that follows. While we are beginning to develop a better understanding of how and why terrorism produces particular outcomes, major gaps in our knowledge remain. Not least the question of why, if terrorism is such a politically unproductive tactic, it remains a stubborn feature of political contention. I address these issues in the conclusion.

**Political utility**

There is a growing consensus that terrorism is an unproductive method of forcing political change. Large-scale analyses have repeatedly demonstrated that terrorism does not reap political rewards. Looking across hundreds of groups, studies by Seth Jones and Martin Libicki (2008), Audrey Kurth-Cronin (2009), and Leonard Weinberg (2012) have all found that a mere seven to thirteen per cent of groups achieve some, or all, of their stated objectives. The vast majority end their campaigns by joining the political process, an outcome represented in 43 per cent of cases, or through disruption by the police, a fate befalling around 40 per cent of groups (Jones & Libicki, 2008; Weinberg, 2012). Nevertheless, some have argued for terrorism’s success (Lake, 2002; Pape, 2005). In the words of Kydd and Walter “terrorism often works. Extremist organisations … engage in terrorism because it frequently delivers the desired response (2006, p. 49). However, as Peter Krause (2013) has put it, the debate over terrorism’s success is perhaps best characterised as a ‘debate that wasn’t’. When the various studies’ methodological approaches are made comparable, by applying the same standard of measurement and taking account of different case selection procedures, there is far less disagreement than might first appear to be the case, with the almost unavoidable conclusion that terrorism is, by and large, a failing political strategy (Krause, 2013).

Of those that do succeed, what then, do we know about their characteristics? One of the most consistent findings is that the larger the group, the greater the chances of achieving positive gains, and the longer they are liable to last (Jones & Libicki, 2008). Ambition is also important in determining outcomes. Groups with larger scale goals, most paradigmatically seen in the jihadist movement’s desire for a global caliphate, are less likely to achieve gains (Krause, 2013). Groups adhering to nationalist/separatist, left or right wing ideologies on the other hand, are more likely to either join the political process, or achieve victory (Gaibulloev & Sandler, 2014). Targeting practices also inform how likely a group is to progress its goals. Comparing guerrilla campaigns targeting the military with campaigns of terrorism attacking civilians, governments appear far less likely to grant concessions when militant groups target non-combatants (Abrahms, 2012). Even taking account of a group’s fighting capacity and that of its opponents, alongside the scale of their political objectives, Abrahms finds civilian targeting offers the strongest explanation for failure, a finding supported in a more recent study by Page Fortna (2015).

In trying to explain the continued use of such an apparently unproductive tactic, Fortna (2015) suggests that organisational longevity may be a viable explanation. Given her finding that terrorism prolongs civil wars, she proposes its use may contribute to organisational survival, albeit at the cost of political gains. In a more detailed account of the role of organisational goals and their relationship to political outcomes, Peter Krause (2014) has posited ‘power distribution theory’ as a potential explanation, arguing that it is the distribution of power within a movement field that determines success. Where a single group has the monopoly of power within a movement, political gains are more likely because the hegemon is able to maximise the movement’s strategic coherence and the credibility of the threat it poses. Moreover, having a single powerful actor provides incentives to pursue strategic goals whilst limiting the occurrence of counterproductive intra-movement violence.

As this brief review shows, we are developing a clear picture of terrorism’s political failure, and of some of the factors that contribute to positive outcomes for militants. It now remains to examine those process goals implicated in terrorism’s effects in order to develop better explanations, not only of the circumstances under which terrorism succeeds and fails, but also why it continues to be used despite its political failure. As we shall see, there is much to learn on both fronts.

**Provocation**

Terrorism’s success is largely dependent on the response of the target, which makes understanding their opponent’s preferences important for militant groups (Harris, 2006). By provoking a state into behaving in ways that harm citizens, non-state actors are able to consolidate their claims for legitimacy, create the conditions for the populous to pressure the government to change policy, or, in the most extreme cases, precipitate open rebellion or even war (Merari, 1993). Provocation is a technique well recognised by militant strategists. Marighella famously made the case for guerrilla action to prompt the government into increasing levels of repression (Marighella, 2002). More recently, provoking America into attacking the Islamic world was a central part of ‘The Awakening’, the first phase in Al-Qaeda’s notional timeline for the conflict that would push America to fight an ‘awakened’ Ummah in a more proximate battlefield (Hussein, 2005, cited in Musharbash, 2005).

Two mechanisms are potentially relevant to interpreting a repressive response to militant violence (de Mesquita & Dickson, 2007). First, that by reacting excessively, the ‘true nature’ of the state is revealed. And second, the experience of repression creates conditions of disenfranchisement or socio-economic deprivation inspiring an uprising (de Mesquita & Dickson, 2007). Provocative violence offers a particular challenge to liberal democracies (Wilkinson, 2011; Li, 2005). In the debate over how best to navigate the tensions between supporting civil liberties and maintaining security, it is important to note that undermining human rights is a potentially counter-productive policy, often leading to more terrorist attacks and carrying the capacity to spark rebellion (Dugan & Chenoweth 2012; Hafez, 2003). Where physical integrity rights (those rights related to murder, disappearance, torture or imprisonment) are not respected, states experience more terrorism (Walsh & Piazza, 2010). Indeed, state behaviour is found to be a more powerful explanation than democratic structure in determining the incidence of terrorism (Walsh & Piazza, 2010). In explaining these findings Walsh and Piazza argue, not only is it harder to collect intelligence from a disenchanted public, repressive states are less likely to receive domestic or international counter-terrorism support.

While provoking counterproductive responses to terrorism can work in a militant group’s favour, there is a puzzle. The relative strength of the state means that provoking a repressive response may harm the group, undermining any strategic gains. Exploring this apparent paradox using data from Western Europe David Carter (forthcoming) found evidence that militant groups adhere to a strategic logic. Carter argues that armed non-state groups’ target selection anticipates state responses: where militants expect discriminate state repression that may lead to substantive damage to the group, provocative guerrilla tactics prevail. Where they anticipate more indiscriminate responses liable to harm civilians, terrorist attacks are more common. Carter’s work demands replication on data beyond Western Europe, and the decision making processes within militant groups demand careful analysis. Nevertheless, the study raises important questions about the relationship between tactical choices and anticipated state responses, and underlines the need to continue to look comparatively at different types of political violence. More generally, work on terrorism’s provocative dimension underlines the importance of looking carefully at the assumptions underpinning the mechanisms by which we assume terrorism to produce particular outcomes. Carter’s (forthcoming) work also demonstrates the importance of considering strategic interactions over time, and underlines the relevance of the type and capacity of opponent armed non-state groups face in determining the effects they are able to produce.

**Outbidding**

Writing over thirty years ago, Martha Crenshaw (1981) drew attention to the relevance of inter-group conflict in understanding the causes of terrorism. Commonly known as ‘outbidding’, a number of studies have examined the way militant groups use violence to compete with other groups over resources. Perhaps first most comprehensively examined by Mia Bloom (2005), outbidding has been used to explain the increase and uptake in suicide operations. Not only are they an effective tactic, they serve to increase levels of support for those groups with greater capacity and willingness to create martyrs. Arguably, a similar situation is unfolding in the conflict between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, where the former is being eclipsed by the brutality of the latter (Burdette, 2015).

We’ve already seen how taking account of organisational factors, including outbidding in fragmented movements, can inform more nuanced explanations about terrorism’s outcomes (Krause, 2014). Looking more closely at the make-up of movements, Joseph Young and Laura Dugan (2014) found robust support for the hypothesis that the greater the number of groups, the lower their longevity, while the most powerful of groups are less likely to fail in conditions of increasing competition. Similarly, groups with fewer competitors are more likely to achieve victory or join the political process (Gaibulloev & Sandler, 2014). Adding further insight to the relevance of organisational factors, Brian Phillips (2015) found that having a rival with opposing political aims led to increased longevity, although he only looked at rivalry between two groups, as opposed to the wider constellation of actors considered by Krause (2014) and Young and Dugan (2014).

Recent work has demonstrated the importance of looking beyond dyadic encounters. For example, a careful account of the Israeli case has found that whilst violence motivates support for militant actors, such outbidding is most powerful within distinct elements of the movement field (Jaeger, Klor, Miaari & Paserman, 2014). Specifically, where there are changes in levels of support, they occur within secular groupings or Islamist groupings, rather than between them. Hence, Fatah’s violence reduces support for less prominent secular factions, and smaller Islamist groups suffer from Hamas’ gains. It seems being the hegemon in a somewhat fragmented movement, with opponents fighting for distinct goals has benefits in producing both positive organisational and political outcomes. Moreover, that contextualising the use of terrorism in light of the make up of the wider movement field reaps important analytical rewards, helping to inform explanations, not only of why particular forms of violence emerge in certain settings, but why some groups secure gains, and others lose ground.

**Spoiling**

Peace negotiations face many impediments, not least of which is political violence. Kydd and Walter (2002) were two of the first to look carefully at the impact of violence on peace agreements, and found it was indeed effective at disrupting peace processes. In their modest sample, parties in civil war were able to reach a peace agreement in six out of ten cases where there was no violence, but in only one in four cases where there were terrorist attacks. In exploring these findings, Kydd and Walter argued that success in derailing peace negotiations is more likely where mistrust between actors is high, and when the moderate oppositional group in negotiations with the government is considered strong enough to prevent violence from more extreme actors, but fails to do so. Violence essentially erodes trust in situations of uncertainty. For example, during the Oslo Peace Process, violent non-state actors on both sides impeded progress (Thomson, 2013). Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination at the hands of Yighal Amir, a far-right Jewish activist had a significant impact on the progress of talks, while Hamas’ suicide attacks had a similarly chilling effect. Importantly, the repercussions of these events continue to resonate in Israel and Palestine today, perhaps most obviously in the shape of the ‘separation barrier’ which, its architects argue, was erected to prevent such attacks.

Developing our understanding of the role moderate and extreme movement factions have in determining the consequences of peace negotiations, Ethan Beuno de Mesquita (2005) set out an explanation of the pattern of violence that surround peace deals. Because more moderate wings are often the ones to make peace agreements, extreme actors, less likely to be satisfied with the outcome of negotiations, establish control of the militant wing, thereby prolonging violence. Moreover, because governments are motivated to secure the counterterrorism support of former militants turned negotiating partners, they are more likely to agree to concessions. As a result, de Mesquita argues, where this series of interactions develops, two patterns of violence are likely to emerge. Concessions with moderate factions can lead to an initial increase in violence, however this is likely to be relatively short lived. Once former militants are persuaded of the government’s trustworthiness, their collaboration supports the state’s counterterrorism response to those militants that rejected the peace process. In more recent work on the organisational determinants and effects of spoiling behaviour, Brian Phillips (2015) argued that intra-field rivalry informs organisational outcomes. In unified movements, spoiling interferes with peace processes, prolonging conflict and extending organisational longevity.

Finally, and in perhaps the most comprehensive account of the spoiling effect of terrorism, Michael Findley and Joseph Young (forthcoming) looked at terrorism’s impact across several decades of data on civil war. Even relatively marginal actors, beyond the primary state–opponent dyad, were found to have the capacity to disrupt peace processes. Moreover, terrorism both extended the duration of wars, and increased the chances that conflict would restart. Such accounts demonstrate the importance of looking at the impact of violence over time, and considering the effects of terrorism on ongoing processes of political contention. Doing so again draws attention to the impact of terrorism on prolonging and exacerbating conflict.

**Intimidation**

A core component of terrorism is instilling fear. Intimidation or coercion can operate via different mechanisms, either through prompting the population to exert pressure on the government to concede to militant demands, by enforcing compliance from the local population, or by signalling to the government, and its supporters, the costs of not agreeing to their demands (Kydd & Walter, 2006). One of the most often cited examples of terrorism’s coercive power is the Madrid train bombings in March 2004. Three days after the attack, Spain went to the polls and elected the Socialist Party, which had campaigned for a withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq. Prior to the attack, the incumbent Popular Party was ahead in the polls, and the bombing has been considered crucial to their electoral failure (Rose, Murphy & Abrahms, 2007). However, a number of studies demonstrate that the relationship between the attack and a change in government was not straightforward (Bali, 2007; Michavila, 2005). Voter’s intentions were informed, not only by the Socialist Party’s policies in relation to the ‘war on terror’, but by the record and response of the incumbents to the attack. More specifically, by continuing to blame ETA for the attack, even after their denial of responsibility, the government lost support and were ultimately punished by the electorate. Moreover, the incumbent party were losing support even before the attack. In the wake of the bombing, and against this backdrop, many more people – up to 1.7 million – were motivated to vote than might otherwise have been expected (Michavila, 2005). Rather than the sole stark fact of experiencing a catastrophic terrorist attack, a collection of factors informed the ultimate outcome of the election.

Looking at the Israeli case, a series of studies have demonstrated the impact of terrorism on electoral outcomes and support for concessions. Although it’s a complex picture, terrorism around elections tends to increase support for the right-wing bloc (Berrebi & Klor, 2008). However, this effect is most acute where the violence actually takes place, interestingly, Berrebi and Klor (2008) found an increase in support for left bloc parties where violence occured outside the voter’s local area. A similar picture emerges when assessing the threat of violence, with increased support for the right-wing in Israel in areas within range of rockets from Gaza (Getmansky & Zeitoff, 2014). Drawing further attention to the importance of the local nature of the effects of violence, Gould and Klor (2009) show that local attacks increase support for territorial concessions in favour of the Palestinians. These were subject to an upper – and rarely met – threshold of violence, beyond which support dropped, leading them to conclude that “terror attacks appear to be strategically effective in coercing Israelis to support territorial concessions” (p.1463).

Evidence from the Palestinian perspective suggests that violence enacted by Israel has a similar effect, of moving people to support more hardline political actors (Jaeger, Klor, Miaari & Paserman, 2012). However, this effect was short lived. Within three months, more moderate attitudes prevailed. Interestingly, David Jaeger and his colleagues found evidence of longer-term determinants of attitudes to the conflict. Those that grew up at the time of the Oslo peace talks were more moderate in their political views compared with those who were teenagers during the First Intifada, an interesting finding that draws attention to both the long term impacts of political violence and the need to understand the wider social and historical context of contention.

**Attrition**

Described as perhaps the most important strategy of terrorism, attrition works by persuading an opponent that an aggressor has sufficient resolve and capacity to exert substantial costs if their demands are not met (Kydd & Walter, 2006). Here, militant actors use terrorism to target the will, rather than the capacity of their opponent, something long recognised as important in securing more substantive war aims (Clausewitz, 1976). Although we’ve already seen that terrorism is generally unable to achieve significant policy goals, looking at lower order concessions, it is possible to see some benefits of terrorism as a strategy of attrition. Recent research looking at terrorism’s capacity to progress lower order political goals has considered the impact of civilian targeting on the likelihood rebel groups are invited to participate in negotiations (Thomas, 2014). Thomas’ conclusions suggest terrorism can be an effective tool in coercing governments to talk. The more oppositional groups target civilians in civil wars, the greater the chance they will be invited to negotiate, and the more concessions they are liable to extract in the following months. It will be important to learn the extent to which these findings are applicable to the wider universe of groups which use violence, including those outside civil wars. Audrey Kurth-Cronin’s (2009) analysis of 457 groups found that fewer than 18 per cent engaged in negotiations. Equally, most of the negotiations that did take place in Kurth-Cronin’s study did not achieve a final resolution, with only around a third of talks actually producing a peace agreement. It seems that while it is possible that violence can precipitate shorter term objectives, such as securing a seat at the negotiating table, this does not necessarily support achievement of long term political goals.

In addition to larger scale studies, there are important case studies demonstrating how the will to fight was eroded by terrorism. In a careful and rigorous study of Jewish violence during the time of the British mandate in Palestine, Bruce Hoffman (2015) demonstrates the power of violence in prompting the British withdrawal. It is a case that demonstrates the three factors Kydd and Walter (2006) argue are important in determining whether terrorism will be successful. First, the state’s interest in the issue was declining. The economic impact of the Second World War at home, pressure from America, and a growing feeling their presence in Palestine was counterproductive meant there was less and less political will to sustain the mandate. Second, there were constraints on the extent to which they were able to retaliate against the Jewish violence. Although some terrible acts of violence and torture were perpetrated by the British, they were unable to sustain a consistent enough regime of repression to wipe out the resistance. Finally, there was increasing sensitivity to the costs of violence, in particular the King David Hotel bombing, and the murder of two British police sergeants, the picture of whose bloodied bodies hanging in an olive grove caused revulsion in the UK. Together, these factors combined to persuade the British to withdraw, and is an important example of the circumstances under which terrorism can be effective.

**Conclusion**

It seems that while terrorism may be able to secure lower order political outcomes it is generally a losing long-term strategy, which begs the question why, given its low success rate, does terrorism continue to be used? Three explanations seem possible. First, militants simply don’t know that terrorism is unlikely to secure political gains. Given the position of uncertainty most political contention takes place in, alongside the limits on human decision making, militant leaders are unable to accurately assess the likelihood of achieving political gains. Indeed, one suggestion is that leaders overestimate their chances of success by drawing inappropriate analogies from guerrilla campaigns which are typically far more effective (Abrahms & Lula, 2012). Cognitive biases such as group polarisation, emotional reactions, or the physical limitations of engaging in risky, violent contention are all liable to influence the ability to reach adequate conclusions about the chances of success (Berrebi, 2009; Davis & Cragin, 2009).

On the other hand, if terrorism is seen as the last resort of a weak and desperate actor, it may be the only option available to them, or at least it may be seen as more economical than selective violence (Kalyvas, 2004). However, Abrahms (2008) contends that terrorism is rarely used as a last resort, often being used where alternative political strategies exist. Moreover, as Kalyvas (2004) has argued, terrorism may be more likely early on in a conflict where resources are limited, with armed non-state actors switching to more discriminate, and effective, forms of violence as a civil war progresses. Even taking account of the dynamic nature of militant group behaviour, the capacity of terrorism to achieve lower order goals may mean it remains an attractive strategy for weaker actors even in the face of longer-term political failure. If complete success is unlikely, violence remains able to secure some strategic benefits, whether that is in provoking opponents, pressing for negotiations, upsetting peace deals or competing with rivals. Beyond this, we need to know much more about the large numbers of militant groups that join the political process. Whether or not these count as successes demands careful examination, as it seems likely that a good many of them progress political goals as part of mainstream politics.

Finally, we may be asking the wrong questions: political outcomes may not be the most appropriate measure of interpreting what violence seeks to achieve. While the strategic model is the dominant approach used to understand the demands of those who use terrorism, many have recognised the importance of terrorism’s expressive nature (Merari, 1993). For example, showing support for a particular political outcome, rather than necessarily trying to achieve it (Lomasky, 1989), acting out of vengeance or anger (Merari, 1993; Schelling, 1989), and encompassing the symbolic, performative and communicative nature of the violence (Coker, 2008). Ultimately, expressive and instrumental functions of terrorism are both likely to be important (Crenshaw, 1995; McCauley, 2002). Reflecting the complex, non-unitary nature of militant groups, there is also increasing recognition of the importance of organisational factors, and the complex ways in which political and group outcomes interact (Krause, 2014). If, as Martha Crenshaw (1988) has argued, group survival is a central part of violent contention it is possible, at least in some cases, that this supersedes pursuing strategic goals, and that militants ultimately prioritise affective ties over political success (Abrahms, 2008).

While progress is being made in interpreting terrorism’s outcomes, if we are to further our understanding of the effectiveness of terrorism it seems necessary to make a number of adjustments in the way we account for outcomes. The first shift is to look beyond bald measures of success and failure. Terrorism is used for different reasons, to different ends, at different times in political campaigns. It is not, as Charles Tilly (2005) reminded us, a causally coherent phenomenon. It is a form of violence which encompasses a range of more or less specified goals, which can change over time, and differ across levels of analysis. Analysis of political violence is likely to reap the rewards of looking across political, organisational, social and cultural effects. It will be important, therefore, to move beyond simplistic arguments about whether or not terrorism ‘works’ to ask more nuanced questions about how and why terrorism produces particular outcomes.

Second, the most convincing studies of terrorism’s outcomes demonstrate the importance of context, be that in terms of socio-cultural history, the wider political opportunity structure, or interaction with others in the movement field. However, we need to learn more about how organisational and political factors interact, and the mechanisms by which intra- and inter-movement rivalry and cooperation inform outcomes. In understanding the effect the wider context has on contention, it is important to carefully examine the role of the state in creating the context from which violence emerges (Goodwin, 2011). Be that because of state policies and the way they shape public opinion, or in the way states can sometimes encourage violence to further their own political ends (Keen, 2012). For example, with respect to spoilers, Greenhill and Major argue that “the type of spoiler does not determine the kinds of outcomes that are possible; instead, the kinds of outcomes that are possible determine the type of spoiler that may emerge at any given time” (2007, p.8). Similarly, with respect to outbidding, it is the shape of the oppositional movement that determines the scope for intra- and inter-faction competition.

Finally, it is important to take account of the dynamic nature of political violence. With a few exceptions – most notably Jakana Thomas’ (2014) use of monthly data – studies generally assess outcomes at discrete moments in time. Recent work has begun to look at the dynamic nature of violence (e.g. Findlay & Young, 2015), but it remains necessary to understand better the impact of violence and strategic interactions over time. For example, Fortna (2015) and Phillips (2015) both found that terrorism has the effect of prolonging conflict, which speaks to terrorism’s impact on sustaining wider patterns of violence and the importance of understanding how terrorism is situated in cycles of contention.

More detailed comparative work will help develop our understanding of all of these factors. While valuable, large-scale comparative studies are less well equipped to examine the detail of causal processes, and face a range of methodological challenges including the distance between theorised and proxy constructs and a sometimes weak analytical foundation (Kalyvas, 2008). A number of scholars have brought significant insight to our knowledge of particular movements through smaller scale comparative work. For example, Peter Krause’s (2014) research on the Palestinian and Algerian national movements, and Lorenzo Bosi and Donatella della Porta’s (forthcoming) study comparing the Provisional IRA and Italian left-wing groups develop valuable explanations about the mechanisms implicated in producing particular outcomes. Looking across different types of groups, using a broader range of outcome measure, understanding how differing forms of political violence interact, and looking beyond the strategic model to develop a more sophisticated account for interpreting terrorism’s effects will all be important parts of the research agenda moving forward.

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