Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists*

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The terms terror, terrorism, and terrorist do not identify causally coherent and distinct social phenomena but strategies that recur across a wide variety of actors and political situations. Social scientists who reify the terms confuse themselves and render a disservice to public discussion. The U.S. government's own catalogs of terrorist events actually support both claims.

TERROR, TERRORISM, TERRORISTS

Some vivid terms serve political and normative ends admirably despite hindering description and explanation of the social phenomena at which they point. Those double-edged terms include *riot*, *injustice*, and *civil society*, all of them politically powerful but analytically elusive (Moore 1979; Vermunt and Steensma 1991; Cohen and Arato 1992; Brass 1996; Herzog 1998; Plotz 2000; Schweingruber 2000; Edwards, Foley, and Diani 2001; Ferree et al. 2002). They also include *terror*, *terrorism*, and *terrorists*. This brief survey shows how and why.

In his address to Congress nine days after the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush declared that "our war on terror begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated" (State Department 2002a:i). Echoed Secretary of State Colin L. Powell in May 2002: "In this global campaign against terrorism, no country has the luxury of remaining on the sidelines. There *are* no sidelines. Terrorists respect no limits, geographic or moral. The frontlines are everywhere and the stakes are high. Terrorism not only kills people. It also threatens democratic institutions, undermines economies, and destabilizes regions" (State Department 2002a:iii). In the words of the president and the secretary of state, terror, terrorism, and terrorists become inseparable concepts, coherent entities, efficacious actors, and enemies to be eradicated.

Students of political processes and collective violence certainly should pay attention to such reification; it exerts a significant influence on world politics. But they should not incorporate the categories wholesale into their own descriptions and explanations of the political processes at hand. In particular, social scientists who attempt to explain sudden attacks on civilian targets should doubt the existence of a distinct, coherent class of actors (terrorists) who specialize in a unitary form of political action (terror) and thus should establish a separate variety of politics (terrorism). This essay argues the following points instead:

- The word *terror* points to a widely recurrent but imprecisely bounded political strategy.

- We can reasonably define that strategy as *asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies using means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within some current regime*.

- A great variety of individuals and groups engage in terror, thus defined, from time to time, most often alternating terror with other political strategies or with political inaction.
- Groups and networks specializing in terror and no other forms of political action do sometimes form, but they typically remain unstable and ephemeral.
- Most groups and networks that engage in terror overlap extensively with government-employed and government-backed specialists in coercion—armies, police, militias, paramilitaries, and the like.
- Even when they organize in opposition to existing governments, specialists in coercion typically adopt forms of organization, external connections, and sources of supply resembling those of government-employed specialists.
- Most uses of terror actually occur as complements or as byproducts of struggles in which participants—often including the so-called terrorists—are engaging simultaneously or successively in other more routine varieties of political claim making.
- Terror as a strategy therefore ranges from (1) intermittent actions by members of groups that are engaged in wider political struggles to (2) one segment in the modus operandi of durably organized specialists in coercion, including government-employed and government-backed specialists in coercion to (3) the dominant rationale for distinct, committed groups and networks of activists.
- Despite the publicity it has received recently, variety (3) accounts for a highly variable but usually very small share of all the terror that occurs in the contemporary world.

In fact, the State Department's own reporting on world affairs generally confirms this argument. The State Department tracks the world's vindictive violence from two distinct perspectives. Mandated by Congress, it issues separate annual reports on human rights and on global terrorism. Under the administration of John F. Kennedy, as Congress appropriated funds for foreign aid it also required the executive branch to report on human rights violations. In its current version, the annual human rights report draws information from American embassies across the world on local instances of government-backed torture, cruel punishment, irregular detention, drastic civil liberties restrictions, compulsory labor, child labor, and related abuses.

Issued in May 2002, the State Department's statement on human rights during 2001 made an obligatory reference to fighting terrorism, roughly equating governments that violate human rights with governments that promote international terror. It declared that its country reports capture "a world still reeling and reacting to the events of last September. Yet the reports' central mission remains the same — to give voice to those who have been denied the freedoms and rights provided for in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The reports confirm that the battle of ideas between those who suppress democracy and human rights and those who would see them flourish remains far from over. Only through the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms can the international community be secure from the scourge of terrorism" (State Department 2002b:1). Nevertheless, the 2001 report on human rights, like its predecessors, focused on ways that governments mistreat (or tolerate the mistreatment of) their own citizens.

The State Department's annual human rights report complements the work of such organizations as Human Rights Watch and Freedom House by cataloguing specific abuses one country at a time (see Human Rights Watch 2000; Karatnycky 2000). Each one of these agencies issues an annual inventory of grim governmental actions and of

governmental complicity with other people's assaults on citizens. By no means all of the abuses they report qualify as violence in the brute force sense of immediate infliction of physical damage. Only a minority of the violent events, furthermore, qualifies as terror defined as asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies using means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within the current regime. But all of them constitute significant threats to the quality of life in the offending countries.

Since the 1980s, the State Department also sends Congress an annual document called *Patterns of Global Terrorism* (Johnson 2001). The State Department defines *terrorism* as "politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" (Ruby 2002:10). Any such definition has the disadvantage of requiring information on motivations and intentions; in fact, solid evidence on motivations and intentions rarely becomes available for collective violence. Still, the report's implicit selection principles single out attacks on noncombatant targets by other-than-regularly-constituted national military forces, especially when someone broadcasts political claims on behalf of the attackers. The annual reports actually describe two different kinds of events: (1) what they call *significant terrorist incidents*, attacks their specialists regard as crossing international lines—because the attackers came from the outside the country, because they received substantial backing from outside, or because they assaulted foreigners; and (2) other attacks by domestic groups on domestic targets.

On a fairly small scale, the State Department's locally knowledgeable observers probably report the bulk of qualifying actions in the first category for the world as a whole. Those are the events for which they supply synopses one by one and make annual counts. They surely miss the vast majority of the world's violent events in category 2 (cf. Bonneuil and Auriat 2000; Davenport 2000; Martínez 2001; Tilly 2003). Figure 1 displays the trend of events in the first category from 1980 through 2001 (State Department 2000, 2001, 2002a). Clearly, the overall trend ran downward. The State Department's count of international terrorist incidents reached a high point in 1988 and generally declined thereafter. The number of deaths in attacks rose from 233 to 405 to an estimated 3,547 (including 3,000 deaths assigned to September 11) from 1999 to 2001. Nevertheless,
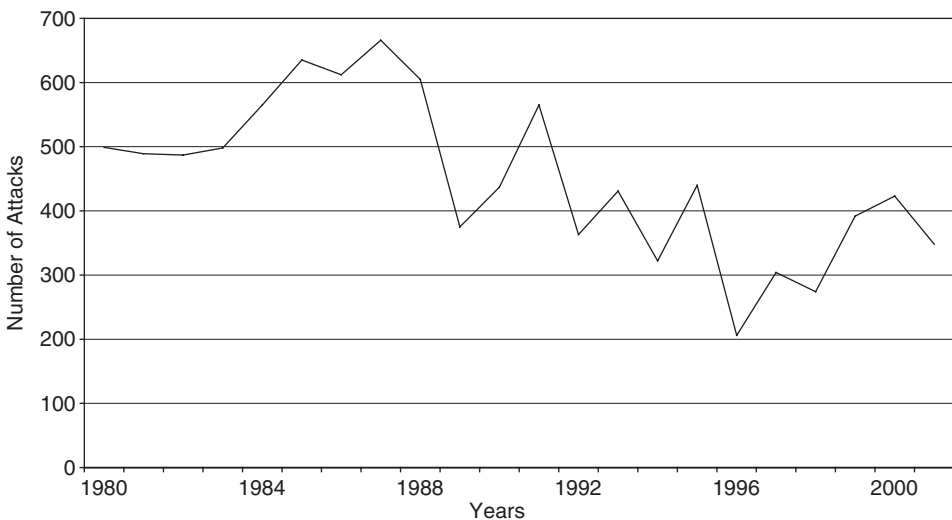

Figure 1. Total international terrorist attacks, 1980–2001.

the 346 attacks of 2001 lay far below the frequencies of the 1980s, and the overall levels of casualties declined as well from the 1980s onward. (The similarly defined Enders-Sandler (2002:161) series for death-dealing events alone from 1970 to 1999 shows a second lethal peak during the early 1990s, and a steep decline thereafter.) From the later 1990s, around half of all tallied attacks consisted not of injuries to persons but of bombs directed at oil pipelines, especially pipelines carrying oil northward to the United States through Colombia. That fact in itself demonstrates that State Department specialists interpreted the "political motivation" required by their definition of terror rather broadly.

When they did voice demands, attackers described in the reports most often called for autonomy or independence for some subnational population or region, replacement of existing governments, or redress of wrongs done to some organization. On the whole, international terrorist incidents identified by State Department observers rose and fell with the activity of independence movements. Whether the minor rise that occurred during the later 1990s represents a new sort of political campaign remains to be seen. The overall trend still runs downward.

Unsurprisingly, the State Department's summaries of international terrorist incidents give special attention to attacks on American interests—American citizens, American service personnel attacked outside of their normal military activity, property owned by Americans or by the U.S. government, and U.S. territory itself. Thus, the airborne attacks of September 11 received exceptional attention in the year's report but still counted as just 4 of the year's 346 "significant terrorist incidents" (State Department 2002a). The previous year's report had singled out South Asia explicitly as a base for terrorism directed toward U.S. interests; had called special attention to the Afghan Taliban's provision of safe haven for Osama bin Ladin and his network; had linked the lethal bombing of the *U.S.S. Cole* in Yemen (October 2000) to bin Ladin; and had added, "The government of Pakistan increased its support to the Taliban and continued its support to militant groups active in Indian-held Kashmir, such as the Harakat ul-Mujahadin (HUM), some of which engaged in terrorism" (State Department 2001:Asia Overview 2). As mirrored in its annual reports on the subject, then, the State Department's working definition of terror singles out violence committed by relatively well-connected groups and directed against politically significant targets of other nationalities, especially of American nationality. Terrorists are the people who perform such acts, and terrorism is the fact of their performing it.

TO DEFINE TERROR

Although definitions as such cannot be true or false, in social science useful definitions should point to detectable phenomena that exhibit some degree of causal coherence—in principle all instances should display common properties that embody or result from similar cause-effect relations. By that criterion, what violent events actually ought to qualify as terrorism? Beginning with citations from the 1790s, the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives two definitions for terrorism: (1) "government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the Revolution of 1789–94 . . . " and (2) "policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted." Both definitions point to the asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within the current regime.

The word *terror* itself entered the West's political vocabulary as a name for French revolutionaries' actions against their domestic enemies in 1793 and 1794. It referred to governmental repression, most directly in the form of executions. About 17,000 legal

executions occurred under the Reign of Terror, and something like 23,000 more occurred illegally (Greer 1935). Some scholars also argue that deaths in the fierce Vendée civil wars of 1793–1795 should count as consequences of the Reign of Terror; their inclusion would bring the total up to the vicinity of 200,000 dead on all sides including regular troops (Gérard 1999; Guenniffey 2000:234–35). At either extreme of the estimates, historians of the French Revolution continue to think of the original Reign of Terror as state-organized or state-backed visitation of violence on France's dissident citizenry during the two central years of radical revolutionary power.

Since the French Revolution, the word *terror* has expanded in scope. Writers on terror continue to use it for governmental intimidation of citizens, as in Joseph Stalin's use of executions to still dissent within the Soviet Union (Mayer 2000). But they also use the term frequently to designate clandestine attacks on governmental targets by domestic opponents such as Basque separatists, the Irish Republican Army, and Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Schmid 2001). At times, furthermore, such civil war practices as ethnic cleansing and genocide receive the designation terror (e.g., Taylor 1999). Thus, the term sprawls across a wide range of human cruelties.

Amid the sprawl, is a coherent phenomenon at work? No useful generalization covers all the different sorts of political interaction for which observers, analysts, and participants sometimes use the term *terror*, much less for *terrorists* and *terrorism*. But we can identify some order in the phenomenon by means of four steps: (1) noticing that a recurrent strategy of intimidation occurs widely in contentious politics and corresponds approximately to what many people mean by terror; (2) recognizing that a wide variety of individuals, groups, and networks sometimes employ that strategy; (3) relating the strategy systematically to other forms of political struggle proceeding in the same settings and populations; and (4) seeing that specialists in coercion ranging from government employees to bandits sometimes deploy terror under certain political circumstances, usually with far more devastating effects than the terror operations of nonspecialists.

Terror as a Strategy

Asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within the current regime does have a crude logic of its own. In addition to whatever harm it inflicts directly, it sends signals— signals that the target is vulnerable, that the perpetrators exist, and that the perpetrators have the capacity to strike again. The signals typically reach three different audiences: the targets themselves, potential allies of the perpetrators, and third parties that might cooperate with one or the other. Although some users of terror (for example, a minority of 19th-century anarchists) operate on the theory that destruction of evil objects is a good in itself, most terror supports demands for recognition, redress, autonomy, or transfers of power. Considered as a strategy, terror works best when it alters or inhibits the target's disapproved behavior, fortifies the perpetrators' standing with potential allies, and moves third parties toward greater cooperation with the perpetrators' organization and announced program.

Multiple Uses of Terror

From Mafiosi to ruthless governments, people who operate protection rackets intermittently deploy terror against enemies and uncertain clients (Gambetta 1993; Stanley 1996; Varese 2001; Volkov 2000, 2002). Whether or not they operate large-scale

protection rackets, repressive governments frequently apply terror to threatening minorities. Weak, beleaguered governments commonly adopt the strategy of exemplary punishment: inflicting terrible public retaliation on those few enemies they manage to seize with the announced threat of visiting similar punishments on others who dare to challenge them. But dissidents seeking autonomy, striking at their rivals, or trying to bring down governments likewise sometimes engage in asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies by means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within the current regime.

During the last few decades, religious and ethnic activists have been by far the most frequent nongovernmental strategists of terror (see, e.g., Kakar 1996; Gurr 2000; Beissinger 2001; Horowitz 2001). Sometimes they have demanded autonomy, sometimes they have sought control of existing governments, but often enough they have struck directly at their religious and ethnic rivals. The terrible Rwandan genocide of 1994 pivoted ultimately on ethnic control of the Rwandan state, and despite the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Tutsi, ended with seizure of state power by Tutsi-dominated military forces. The genocide itself activated all these different uses of terror (Prunier 1995, 2001; Des Forges et al. 1999; Taylor 1999; Mamdani 2001; Pillay 2001; Uvin 2001).

Terror and Other Forms of Struggle

As these varied examples suggest, the strategy of terror appears across a wide variety of political circumstances, in the company of very different sorts of political struggle. Attacks of Irish Protestant and Catholic activists on each other and on governmental targets, for instance, frequently follow the strategy of terror, but they generally intersect with other forms of negotiation at international, national, and local levels (Jarman 1997; Keogh 2001). In many parts of the world, specialized military forces—governmental, nongovernmental, and antigovernmental—frequently engage in kidnapping, murder, and mutilation in addition to their occasional pitched battles with other armed forces.

To take just one case, during the late 1990s the self-styled Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) ravaged the Rwenzori mountain region of western Uganda, "brutalizing and killing civilians and looting. Hundreds of civilians were killed in ADF raids and ambushes on unprotected civilian homes throughout the year. Some of those killed by the ADF were mutilated, sometimes by beheading. Civilians, both adults and children, were abducted during ADF raids to serve as porters or for forced recruitment into the rebel army" (Human Rights Watch 2000:84). Because armed forces depend on arms, equipment, food, and pay even when they are living off the land, such terror-wielding armies thrive especially where they can seize control of income-generating resources such as drugs, timber, diamonds, and other minerals. They then often adopt terror to maintain control of the crucial resources rather than concentrating on the seizure of state power. Extensive connections with emigrant diasporas magnify those effects, most likely because the exiles both provide external support for rebels and offer conduits for contraband into and out of rebel territory (Collier and Hoeffler 2001).

Terror and Specialists in Coercion

The prominence of organized armed forces in certain types of terror lends itself to analytic confusion. It is all too easy to conflate terror-deploying governments, armies,

militias, paramilitaries, and rebels with conspiratorial zealots. The State Department's general statements about human rights and terror in 2001 featured just such a conflation. We actually need a twofold distinction: first between violent specialists and others, and then between actors who deploy terror within their own operating territories and those who direct it elsewhere.

Figure 2 schematizes the two distinctions, assigning characteristic names to the four corners of a two-dimensional space. *Autonomists* stand for all those politically active groups whose members sometimes launch terror attacks on authorities, symbolic objects, rivals, or stigmatized populations on their own territories without becoming durably organized specialists in coercion. *Zealots* maintain similar connections with each other but commit their violent acts outside of their own base territories; they include long-term exiles who return home to attack their enemies. Governmental, nongovernmental, and antigovernmental *militias* maintain enduring organizations of coercive specialists and exercise terror within their base territories. Finally, *conspirators* organize specialized striking forces for operations away from base. (Terror-inflicting armies operating abroad also fit into this corner of the diagram, but they strike even more rarely than do mobile organizations of conspirators.) The diagram as a whole summarizes this paper's main point: A remarkable array of actors sometimes adopt terror as a strategy, and therefore no coherent set of cause-effect propositions can explain terrorism as a whole.

The crude typology distinguishes four rather different sorts of relations between the authors and victims of terror, hence four different varieties of politics. It also emphasizes a crucial fact about actually existing terror: Very little of it actually occurs in the diagram's upper-right-hand corner—where we find specialists in coercion who operate outside their home bases. Most terror occurs on the perpetrators' own home territory, and nonspecialists—zealots —inflict a significant share of the terror that does occur outside of home territory. The fact does not diminish the horror of September 11. But it does warn against analyzing all terror as if it consisted of closer or more distant approximations to that terrible series of attacks on the United States. Properly understood, terror is a strategy, not a creed. Terrorists range across a wide
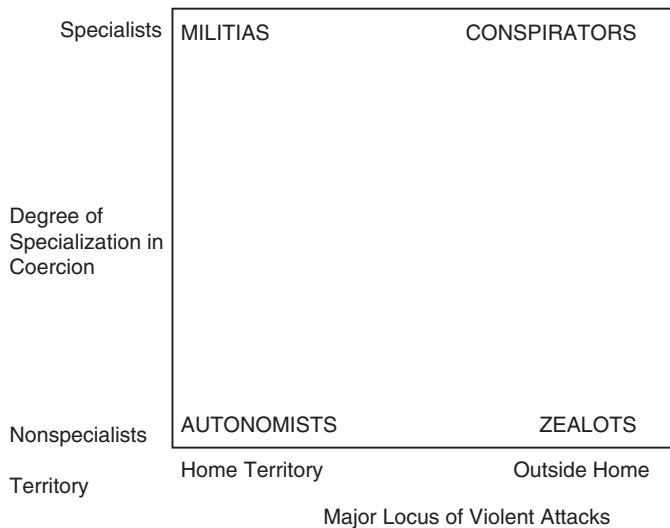

Figure 2. A crude typology of terror-wielding groups and networks.

spectrum of organizations, circumstances, and beliefs. Terrorism is not a single causally coherent phenomenon. No social scientist can speak responsibly as though it were.

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