What is Terrorism?

CDSn4002 Political Violence

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The 2014 Vrbětice ammunition explosions

- two explosions of ammunition depots occurred in 2014 in Vrbětice, a village in the Czech Republic, killing two people
- the blasts destroyed two warehouses of a state-owned company that stores (and trades with) ammunition and weapons
- the cargo was to be sold and transported either to Syria or Ukraine
- the explosions were engineered by two Russian military intelligence (GRU) officers, according to Czech Police and Security Information Service
- many Czech newspapers and state officials refer to the incident as (Russian) state-sponsored terrorism

An Inclusive Definition of Terrorism

- April 2019: The US designated Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps a foreign terrorist organization

- it was the first time Washington formally labeled another country's military a terrorist group -- such a step conflicted with most established official (US) definitions of terrorism

- it also conflicted with the established academic usage of the term (reserved for non-state actors)

- its head Quasim Soleimani, was, along other Iranian officials, officially designated "terrorist" in 2011

- he was killed by an American drone strike in January 2020

Jaggar: An Inclusive Definition of Terrorism

- after 9/11, a dominant image of a terrorist is "the brown-skinned Arab or Muslim looking" person (Jaggar 2005)

- this excludes "homegrown white terrorism"

- but also the practice when, for example, attacks on non-government targets, such as abortion clinics, or on members of unpopular or stigmatized [religious, ethnic, racial, sexual etc.] groups are defined as hate crimes,

- i.e. suggesting that such attacks are no more than expressions of **personal** prejudice

An Inclusive Definition of Terrorism

- can police violence against suspects or military violence against political demonstrators, i.e., acts by the representatives of the state, be sometimes considered acts of terrorism?

- the original meaning of the term terrorism (18th century revolutionary France) denoted the acts/activities of state/government against the enemies of the new political order

- Jaggar proposes **an alternative account of terrorism** that considers:

Definitional Criteria

- **a) the purpose or goals of terrorism**
- it may or may not be politically (as opposed to personally) motivated
- it covers all instances of situations of violence intended to create a climate of terror
- **b) the targets of terrorism**
- assumes that the direct target of terrorist violence is usually secondary rather than its primary target; the primary target is usually a wider population that the terrorists wish to intimidate
- it targets the innocent bystanders (i.e. people who are not directly involved in the the fight)

Definitional Criteria

- **c) the agents of terrorism**

- governments and states, alongside the substate/nonstate groups may resort to terrorism

- the inclusion of state agents brings the definition of terrorism to its original formulation

- **d) the methods of terrorism**

- how distinctive it is from other forms of violence?

- terrorism has no distinctive method of intimidation

"Terrorism is the use of extreme threats or violence designed to intimidate or subjugate governments, groups, or individuals. It is a tactic of coercion intended to promote further ends that in themselves may be good, bad or indifferent. Terrorism may be practiced by governments or international bodies or forces, sub-state groups or even individuals.

Its threats or violence are aimed directly or immediately at the bodies or belongings of innocent civilians, but these are typically terrorists' secondary targets; the primary targets of terrorists are the governments, groups or individuals that they wish to intimidate." (p. 209)

Possible Advantages

- her definition helps to clarify a number of empirical distinctions, including those between terrorism and

- **war** (terrorism is not an alternative to war, it is a tactic that may or may not be used in wartime);

- **low intensity conflicts** (ambushes and sabotages designed to undermine economy and weaken a population's morale)

- **guerilla war** (where the occasional perpetration of atrocities by individual soldiers does not necessarily indicate that terrorism is authorized)

Possible Advantages

- "by leaving the question of who may be agent of terrorism, excluding none by stipulation, it counters the moral bias of recent usage, which tends to obscure and so justify terrorist intimidation by official forces"

- it also opens the question of whether trade sanctions or embargos against economically weak countries may sometimes be terrorist

- it also envisages the possibility that the whole system of legislation or specific practices of law enforcement might be terrorist (e.g. those mandating race or gender apartheid)

Essentially Contested Concept

- the term terrorism has become an "essentially contested concept" whose meaning spurs endless disputes that have no clear resolution:

- the practice described is internally complex, involves references to several dimensions, and its definitional characteristics are open to competing interpretations

- our inability to capture the concept in a generally acceptable definition is the consequence of the nature of the concept itself

Essentially Contested Concept

- B) the concept suffers from border and membership problems: unclear where terrorism stops and other forms of political violence begin (e.g. guerilla warfare, air piracy, assassinations)

- the same acts may be considered terrorist acts on some occasions but not on others (e.g. depending on the assumed motivations of the perpetrators or the social standing of their victims)

- C) terrorism also suffers from concept stretching: e.g. cyber-terrorism which rarely involves any reference to violence or the threat of violence

Schmid's frequencies of definitional elements of terrorism (%):

- 1. Violence, Force 83.5, 2. Political 65, 3. Fear, Terror emphasized 51, 4. Threat 47, 5. Psychological effects and (anticipated) reactions 41.5,

- 6. Victim-Target differentiation 37.5, 7. Purposive, Planned, Systematic, Organized action 32, 8. Method of combat, strategy, tactic 30.5, 9. Extranormality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constrains 30, 10. Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance 28

- 11. Publicity aspect 21.5, 12. Arbitrariness, impersonal, random character, indiscrimination 21, 13. Civilians, noncombatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims 17.5, 14. Intimidation 17, 15. Innocence of victims emphasized 15.5

Schmid's frequencies
of definitional elements of terrorism (%):

- 16. Group, movement, organization as perpetrator 14, 17. Symbolic aspect, demonstration to others 13.5, 18. Incalculability, unpredictability, unexpectedness of occurrence of violence 9, 19. Clandestine, covert nature 9,

- 20. Repetitiveness, serial or campaign character of violence 7, 21. Criminal 6, 22. Demands made on third parties 4

Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby—in contrast to assassination—the direct targets of violence are not the main targets.

The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population and serve as message generators.

Threat—and violence—based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main target (audiences(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought

Terrorism in polsci journals

- Weinber et al (2004) analyzed definitions of terrorism used in three leading international political science journals and compared their core features with the Schmid's older definitional elements

- they found out that they were much l**ess likely to include the arousal of fear and terror** (element 3) **and psychological effects** and anticipated reactions (element 5) as important components

- a consensus that terrorism is **a politically motivated tactic** involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of **publicity** plays a major role

- this consensus definition stresses **terrorism as an activity, a method of conduct**, over the psychological elements

Terrorism in polsci journals

- the distinction between combatants and non-combatants is not made, nor between immediate target and wider audience is mentioned

- such a consensus definition is highly general

- it has climbed too high on the ladder of abstraction to distinguish among different types of politically driven violence aimed at achieving publicity

Public Perception of Terrorism Matters

- the central role that public opinion plays in our understanding of how terrorism works warrants an investigation of **what the public perceives** as terrorism

- understanding what ordinary citizens think terrorism is is a crucial prerequisite to understanding how they react to it

- normativity: terrorism is understood as **qualitatively different** from other types of acts of violence

- to categorize something as terrorism is to **delegitimate** its goals

- terrorism: "subjective" and "objective" components (Huff&Kertzer, 2018 – an experimental study of how the public perceives terrorism)

Subjective and Objective Components of Incidents

- **objective components**:
- the type (shooting, bombing, protest) and severity of the violence (number of casualties),
- and the targets (military vs. civilian) and location of the incident (our country, a country very different from ours)
- **subjective components**:
- actor description (a Muslim, a white supremacist) and actor type (an individual, an organization,)
- actor motivation (unclear, government overthrow, target hatred, policy change)

Huff & Kertzer (2018)

- the **likelihood** that ordinary people classify an event as terrorism **depends on relatively objective facts**, such as the extremity and severity of violence

- the public is also influenced by **who carried out** the incident and why:

- acts are more likely to be seen as terrorism if they are carried out by **organizations**, less likely if they are carried out by individuals with histories of mental illness, more likely if they are carried out by **Muslims**, more likely if they are **carried out in order to achieve political** goals,

- violent incidents **do not need to target civilians** in order to be understood as terrorism

- the public thinks that incidents motivated by hatred are just as likely to be terrorism as those motivated by more formal policy goals

Terrorism as a mode of warfare

- Merari (1993) describes terrorism as **a mode of warfare** and examines its characteristics

- he disagrees with the concept of terrorism, such as the one put forward by Jaggar:

- "the purpose, circumstances and methods involved in state violence against its own citizens are entirely different from those that characterize violence exercised by states against other states or by insurgent groups against governments"

- the application of the term terrorism to all these situations is obfuscating and disrupts academic research

Limitations on a general definition

- our understanding of **terrorism** is **politically/culturally conditioned** and the emerging (scholarly) consensus (based on Schmid's "elements") is probably **not shared elsewhere**

- violence, political goals, and fear & terror (Schmid) do not provide the ground to distinguish between terrorism and other forms of violent conflicts, such as guerilla or even conventional war

- the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki can also fit such a definition of terrorism

- if a definition of terrorism is equally applicable to nuclear war, conventional war and guerilla, the term loses any useful meaning and becomes a synonym for violent intimidation in a political context

Terrorism as a mode of warfare

- Merari (1993): the term terrorism
- should be associated with a **certain kind of violent** actions carried out by **individuals and groups** rather than by states, and with events which take place in **peacetime** rather than as a part of a conventional war
- is different from guerilla (small war), which is a diffuse type of war against a stronger enemy; guerillas try to compensate for their inferiority in manpower by a very flexible style of warfare (hit-and-run operations)

Terrorism vs. guerilla warfare

- if terrorist attacks are carried out systematically, they constitute a distinct strategy of insurgency

- unlike terrorism, **guerilla tries to establish physical control of a territory** (to provide it with human reservoir for recruitment, a logistical base and the ground and infrastructure for establishing a regular army)

- terrorist strategy does not attempt to control the territory

- terrorists typically operate in very small units

Method vs. cause

- terrorism and freedom fighters, though often represented as different interpretations of the same phenomena, in fact describe two different aspects of human behavior:

- terrorism is a *method* of struggle, while freedom fighters refer to their *cause*

- the causes of groups which adopt terrorism are as diverse as the interests and aspirations of humankind

Terrorism vs. conventional war

- terrorism is not different from other forms of warfare in the targeting of noncombatants

- however, **terrorism**, more than any other form of warfare, **systematically breaches the internationally accepted rules of war**

- terrorism discards these laws altogether in **refusing to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants**

- international terrorism also rejects the limitations of war zones

Strategic ideas behind terrorism

- "**propaganda by the deed**": a hope to transform a small terrorist group to a (revolutionary) movement

- **intimidation**: not of the state officials (not very successful) but of select categories of people (judges, jurors, journalists, ...)

- **provocation**: to draw repressive responses of the state which, if draconic but not effective, may spur antigovernment/antiregime sentiments

- **strategy of chaos**: to demonstrate the government's inability to impose law and order (e.g. by random bombing)

- **strategy of attrition**: hoping that if they persist, the government would eventually yield

How successful is terrorism?

- very much depends on **how we define** success
- many terrorist organizations strive to depose the current government and to seize power, only few succeeded, namely, anticolonial organizations on Cyprus, Kenya and Algeria
- probably this is the only category of terrorist organizations in which the issue at stake (decolonization and independence) is far more important for the insurgency than for the governments
- recruitment of supporters
- achieving international attention to their cause
- acquiring international legitimacy
- gaining partial political concessions