
Taking Stock of Research Methods and Analysis on Oppositional Political Terrorism

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A variety of techniques are used by journalists, practitioners, experts, consultants, and scholars in conducting research on terrorism.² This information appears in the context of journal articles, chapters in scholarly books, academic monographs, newspaper and magazine articles, and books for popular audiences. In general, this work can be divided into qualitative and quantitative approaches. A subtle but necessary distinction should also be made between research produced for popular audiences and that which is done for the academic or scholarly community. There is an understanding that work for this latter audience is more rigorous but may lack the excitement and sensational appeal to sustain a wider interest. Nevertheless, a symbiotic relationship exists between popular and academic writers; at various times they depend upon or use research from each other. Periodically, researchers conduct comprehensive reviews of the research on terrorism and the methods used by investigators. Since the examples from which they draw are illustrative, these writings are not meant to be comprehensive, but rather illustrative. Building on similar work by Schmid (1983) and Gurr (1988), I review salient contributions in both qualitative and quantitative approaches to terrorism studies.

Qualitative Research on Terrorism

Introduction

The bulk of research on oppositional political terrorism uses qualitative methods. This primarily consists of descriptive accounts of terrorists, their actions, and measures to combat these actions. Often this work is assembled into case studies that later appear in articles and books. Some of the better information is gathered through participant observation and can be divided into two tiers of literature, all separated by the degree to which they use primary versus secondary data (e.g., sources of information). Qualitative research helps us to understand the psychology of participants and the social setting in which they operate. It also aids in contextualizing the material that is developed in quantitative studies (e.g., Manheim and Rich, 1996; Babbie, 2001).

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First-Tier Research

There are four basic types of primary source information on terrorism: autobiographies, “incident reports,” hostage experiences with terrorists and terrorism, and firsthand accounts of implementing policies. In general, the closer researchers are to sources, the greater the potential for validity.

Autobiographies. When terrorists write about their experiences, it is either in the form of autobiographies (e.g., Vallieres, 1972a; 1972b; Iyad, 1981; De Vault, 1982; Hansen, 2002; Ayers, 2003) or handbooks on techniques (e.g., Marighela, 1971). Sometimes these memoirs are produced while they are on the run (hiding from the authorities), incarcerated, or after their release. Other books are written once they have renounced terrorism and assumed political office. In general, they are rationalizations for the violence that they engaged in or encouraged others to perform. These works are often ideological writings or tactical suggestions.

Incident Reports and Accounts. Perhaps “incident reports” is a bad term, but occasionally individuals (e.g., soldiers, commanders, etc.) who were participants in rescue efforts or antiterrorist campaigns will give an account of their actions (e.g., Loomis, 1999; Netanyahu, 2001). This often portrays the writers as heroes operating in a crazy or complicated situation or environment.

Hostages’ Experiences with Terrorists. A handful of hostage accounts were written in the 1980s. For example, Terry Waite and Terry Anderson, both held hostage by Middle-Eastern terrorists in southern Lebanon during the late 1980s published firsthand accounts of their time in captivity (Anderson, 1993; Waite, 1993).

Firsthand Accounts of Implementing Policies. Some statesmen have written about their countries’ experiences with terrorism and how they have developed policy to combat it (e.g., Netanyahu, 1986). Otherwise high-ranking government officials have also discussed terrorism. Former senior CIA officer Robert Baer (2003) wrote a book on his experiences dealing with terrorism as did Richard Clarke (2004), the previous White House national coordinator for security, infrastructure protection, and counterterrorism on President George W. Bush’s National Security Council.

Problems with First-Tier Research. While the abovementioned writing is rich in detail, it is often too biased in the authors’ perspective; a little more distance would have improved this kind of research. Primary-source data tends to be more accurate than secondary-source information. In many respects there is no substitute for firsthand experience or observation. Needless to say, eyewitness accounts can suffer from bias. The copious research about eyewitness testimony (e.g., Loftus, 1996) should make people sober with respect to unqualified championing of the benefits of qualitative research methods. As in the childhood game of broken telephone, each new person receiving the information purposely or accidentally (consciously or unconsciously) interprets, shapes, and distorts it.

Second-Tier Qualitative Research on Terrorism

Introduction. In general, there are five types of second-tier qualitative studies on terrorism: biographies of terrorists, case studies of terrorist organizations, case studies on types of terrorism, case studies on particular terrorist incidents, and case studies of terrorism in selected regions and countries. The focus in this category is an

analysis of primary research (i.e., conducted by a person who has firsthand immediate experience), occasional interviews, and the integration of secondary research (information that analyses primary research). Some of the qualitative research involves the intense examination of terrorists' autobiographies and biographies, terrorist propaganda (Cordes, 1987), case studies of groups, and some comparative case studies of groups.

Biographies. A number of individuals have compiled biographies of well-known terrorists or individuals who have engaged in terrorist actions, including Yasser Arafat (Hart, 1984), Menachim Begin (e.g., Seidman, 1990), Osama bin Laden (e.g., Bodansky, 2001), Carlos "the Jackal" (e.g., Smith, 1976; Dobson, 1977), and Abu Nidal (e.g., Melman, 1986). Once again, the emphasis is on description with some analysis, but theories are rarely articulated or tested.

Case Studies of Terrorist Groups. Some reporters and scholars have spent a great deal of their careers researching and writing case studies of terrorist organizations (e.g., Burke, 2003). Some, like Bell (1997), an American academic, have accompanied members of the Irish Republican Army Provisionals on raids and bombing missions. Chaliand (1983), a French reporter, conducted similar studies on both guerrilla organizations and on terrorist groups. Case studies on the Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) have been produced by Fournier (1984) and Stewart (1970). And a number of case studies of the Baader-Meinhof Gang (e.g., Becker, 1978); Basque separatists who are members of the ETA (e.g., Clark, 1984); Black September (Dobson, 1974); and the Western European group Action-Direct (Dartnell, 2001) have been produced.

In the past decade, many edited books have been published with separate chapters on particular groups. This kind of effort is often preceded by a conference at which the papers are discussed and then later assembled (Ross, 1991). Crenshaw, for example, has edited a series of case studies on terrorist groups (1994). In the past three years, we have seen an increase in the publication of case studies of al-Qaeda done by reporters (Reeve, 1999) and scholars (e.g., Gunaratna, 2002).

Case Studies on Types of Terrorism. Some researchers have focused disproportionately on specific types of terrorism. Most dominant is the research on hijackings (Joyner, 1974); hostage-taking (Aston, 1986; Sandler and Scott, 1987), narcoterrorism (Ehrenfeld, 1992), ecoterrorism (Nilson and Burke, 2002), biological threats (Miller, Engelberg, and Broad, 2001), and nuclear terrorism (Allison, 2004; Allison et al., 1996). Much of this research is the work of reporters and/or comes out of conference presentations.

Case Studies on Particular Terrorist Incidents. Although many writers examine terrorist incidents in passing, researchers periodically focus on individual incidents that have attracted considerable attention. Case studies that fit in this genre include those on the September 1972 Munich massacre (e.g., Miller, 1990); the June 1985 Air India tragedy (e.g., Blaise and Mukherjee, 1987); the December 1988 Pan Am Flight 103/Lockerbie incident (e.g., Emerson and Duffy, 1990; Cohen and Cohen, 2001); and the August 1998 bombing in Omagh by the IRA (e.g., Dingley, 2001). Most recently, the 9/11 attacks have led to considerable scholarly attention. This latest incident has led to the production of a great number of case studies ranging from works done by reporters (Posner, 2003), to scholars (e.g., Pyszynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, 2002; Dudziak, 2003), to government reports (United States, 2004).

Case Studies of Terrorism in Selected Regions and Countries. Many researchers have developed case studies concerning the pattern of terrorism in a specific region or country. In particular, this line of inquiry looks at the causes and effects of terrorism and reviews government documents in each country's war against terrorism. Some of this work includes a focus on Western Europe (Corrado, 1983); Sub-Saharan Africa (Denemark and Welfling, 1983); and Latin America (e.g., Sloan, 1983). This research tends to focus on the advanced industrialized countries such as the United States (Bell and Gurr, 1979; Bodansky, 1993; Smith, 1994), West Germany (Kellen, 1990), Canada (Ross, 1988b), and Italy (Weinberg and Eubank, 1987b; Ferracuti, 1990; Della Porta, 1992). Some of the more popular approaches have been edited books with separate chapters devoted to terrorism in each country (e.g., Buckley and Fawn, 2003).

Problems with Second-Tier Literature. Most secondary-source research depends on open source work (e.g., interviews done by others etc.). Typically investigators depend on this information to create their own studies. The majority of the "data" is in fact secondary-source material and little depends on primary information.

The analysis of secondary source information is problematic. The further an investigator is from the primary source, the more distorted the information may be. Again, each new person may put his or her spin on the findings. This approach lacks the intimacy one might achieve by getting information from the field or—preferably—directly from the source. A considerable amount of case study research has been the work of reporters. Perhaps their flexible schedules and audience needs allows them to engage in this kind of research.

Quantitative Research on Terrorism

Introduction

The amount of quantitative studies on oppositional political terrorism pales in comparison to the number of those that depend upon qualitative methods. Conterminously, the majority of research on terrorism has been marked by theoretical generalizations based upon a lack of hard data (Mickolus, 1981: 13). Statistical information, specifically that on political terrorism, is generally unavailable to the public, inaccurate, dated, or limited to international or transnational events. Nevertheless, when examining quantitative research on terrorism, it becomes clear that the bulk of work has been done through the statistical analysis of information collected through content analyses of newspaper reports on terrorism and information contained in incident level databases.

Empirical Analysis of Media Coverage

A growing number of empirical analyses explore the connection between the media and terrorism. The most important type of research uses content analysis; this usually entails counting and statistically analyzing how terrorism is mentioned in the context of a particular form of communication (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 1981). In the field of terrorism studies, content analyses have primarily used four types of sources: newspapers, personal statements and communications, public appeals, and popular culture. Typically, however, content analyses entail counting

the number of articles on terrorism that appear in newspapers per issue, month, and year, and then determining the relationship between the numbers of stories on terrorism and acts of this form of political violence.

Kelly and Mitchell (1981) suggest that “through content analysis, the sort of subconscious judgments which one naturally makes ... [and maybe achieved through] evaluating books, newspapers, and other forms of communications, are made more carefully recorded and analyzed to reveal underlying trends and orientations” (p. 275).

Occasionally, the sources are evaluated. For example, Herman and O’Sullivan (1989: 194) looked at who the media interviewed to obtain background details for articles on terrorism. They found that 42.3 percent were U.S. government officials, 24.4 percent were private sector experts, and 18.0 percent were others—“mainly the ‘victims’ of terrorist acts.” “Objective” sources were generally overlooked. The majority of papers analyzed for their coverage of terrorist events originates in Western countries and are considered the elite press. For instance, Kelly and Mitchell (1981) reviewed *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London. Fuller (1988) examined the *Christian Science Monitor*, and Picard and Adams (1991) studied the terrorist coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

Generally neglected are ethnic, racial, and/or religious-based newspapers directed toward members of a particular community and connected, in some sense, with places where a significant number of terrorist actions have occurred. There are numerous monthly, bi monthly, quarterly, or semiannual newsletters printed in major urban centers by religious groups, nonsectarian associations, and even individual citizens. Additionally, few content analyses (e.g., Delli Carpini and Williams, 1987) of radio and television broadcasts have been conducted which focus on terrorism.

Because of the sporadic nature of these articles, it is doubtful that they are capable of instigating terrorist activities on the part of their readers. At the most, they may reinforce perceptions already held by these readers. Thus it appears that the deciding factor in the ability of the press to motivate terrorism, is the mindset of people who are exposed to the mass media. None of the information that is reported is exceptional or exclusive of these sources; it can also be found in other venues.

Finally, more sophisticated or alternative methodologies could be used to address the issue of how influential the media is on the behavior of its readers and viewers, specifically as it relates to terrorist activities. This might include improved processes for electronically downloading entire periodicals onto a computer to allow for better textual analysis of the issue in question. It might also include some kind of survey or empirical analysis of incarcerated terrorists that would tap their media consumption patterns prior to and during their terrorist activity.

Events Data Analysis

The most prevalent and relevant quantitative data for the study of terrorism is events data. The main change in terrorist research over the past 34 years has been an increase in attempts to conduct quantitative studies using sophisticated statistical modeling (e.g., Midlarsky, Crenshaw, and Yoshida, 1980; Sandler, Tschirhart, and Cauley, 1983; Atkinson, Sandler, and Tschirhart, 1987; Im, Cauley, and Sandler, 1987; Laplan and Sandler, 1988; O’Brien, 1996; Smith and Damphousse, 1996;

Smith and Orvis, 1994). This development was aided by the development of more portable and economically priced computers and statistical programs that could do quick computations, and thus database research in turn improved. Research on terrorism became more sophisticated and useful, which also meant that there were now people who were interested in and properly trained to conduct more sophisticated research.

Advantages of Databases

Databases can help us determine trends, give us a better idea of who is committing terrorist acts, compile the types of terrorism that occur, and analyze how terrorism has changed over time. A data set will also allow researchers to test hypotheses in a quantitative manner and to develop models. This work has been used primarily to aid descriptive research, contagion studies, and recommendations for policy changes and practitioner responses. This kind of information is believed to ultimately help us predict future incidents.

Surveying the Major Databases on Terrorism

One of the best descriptions of data available was conducted by Schmid (1983: Chapter 3). An alternative data gathering exercise was a survey performed by Fowler (1981). Unfortunately, both Schmid and Fowler's listings are outdated, and many of the compilers cannot be tracked down to confirm the current status of their databases nor their data collection methods (Ross, 1991: 21-26). Regardless, data sets can be categorized based on whether they were constructed by scholars, government agencies, or research corporations; and by the degree to which they focus on domestic versus international/transnational terrorism.

To begin, the majority of databases have focused on international and transnational terrorist events, whereas other types of terrorism (e.g., domestic) have been seriously underrepresented (Mitchell, 1985; Gurr, 1988; Ross, 1988a; 1988b). Three data sources that specialize in international/transnational terrorism and are routinely identified by analysts are: the Control Risks Group Data Base, Rand Corporation Data Base, and the State Department/Central Intelligence Agency/International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorism Events (ITERATE) I, II, and III data sets (e.g., Mickolus 1981).

More recently, after 9/11, the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (now the Office for Drugs and Crime) has created a database through its Terrorism Prevention Branch. Although details are sketchy, this organization claims that its database has been used in the capability building of countries throughout the world.

The RAND-St. Andrews (University) Database on Terrorism and Low-Intensity Conflict (e.g., Hoffman and Claridge 1988) was built from articles that appeared in newspapers and magazines from around the world. This research effort has since been renamed the "Centre for the Study of Political Violence Data Base Project" (<http://www.standrews.ac.uk/intrel/research/cstpv/pages/database.html>).

The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzlia Israel (www.ict.org.il) has also established a database on terrorism. Although this database is available online, the details on how this data is gathered are not publicly available, and it lacks the capability of statistical analysis that most researchers would need.

Over the past six years, a cooperative effort has taken place between the Oklahoma City National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT) and Rand. Their database provides information on incidents of both domestic and international terrorism. Built on open-source information and at a cost of \$700,000, this is one of several projects the MIPT (www.mipt.org) is pursuing.

Most of the databases on domestic terrorism have been constructed by academics (Ross, 1991; 1994; Smith, 1994; Smith and Damphousse, Sloan, 1988; Weinberg and Eubank, 1987a; 1987b). The majority of this work is limited to terrorism that occurred in a single country (e.g., Clarke, 1983; Ross, 1988b; 1994; Weinberg and Eubank, 1987b) or to campaigns perpetrated by a single group or motivated by a particular issue. Some researchers restrict their data collection efforts to a handful of campaigns (e.g., Hewitt, 1984; 1990). Rarely, however, are crossnational quantitative studies of terrorism performed (e.g., Engene and Skjolber, 2002; Bueno de Mesquita, 2005a). The few projects that are statistical in nature involve cross-national statistical research.

There are four primary reasons why a small amount of cross-national studies of terrorism exists:

1. The cost of compiling and acquiring data is prohibitive.
2. There is limited methodological sophistication of scholars to do complex quantitative research.
3. Investigators are reluctant to share data.
4. The various data sets are different (i.e., have different selection criteria, alternative formats, etc.), thus making comparison between data sets difficult.

This problem can be attributed to several causes. One is the limited methodological sophistication of scholars. There are two basic types of statistics: descriptive and inferential. For most general inquiries, all one really needs to know are descriptive statistics. This includes frequencies, mediums (i.e., averages), modes, ranges, and other elementary statistical measurements. And, for the most part, this is what the State Department provides to the public. However, when more complex questions are asked, one need not only use inferential statistics (regression analysis, factor analysis, path analysis, etc.), but must also know how to interpret them. Many individuals who work in this area of research—while having some basic understanding of elementary statistics—do not know how to do more complex quantitative studies.

Another reason for the limitations involves cooperation among scholars and the unwillingness of governments to share intelligence with academics. Most researchers will try to exhaust the utility of their data sets (euphemistically called “mining”) and publish as much as possible from them until they make them public if they do so at all. There is also the tendency for researchers to reify their data sets and the methods they use to collect and analyze the materials. Furthermore, the fact that many data sets are dispersed in a variety of different formats often makes comparison difficult. Finally, the cost of compiling and acquiring data is perhaps the biggest roadblock. Government agencies, on the other hand, are quite distrustful of outsiders who may scrutinize their work.

The development of crossnational and longitudinally comparative measures of political terrorism is an extremely complex task. Over the last decade, however, some significant gains have been made with this research. This includes work by Bueno de Mesquita (2005a; 2005b), which looks at the types of individuals who join terrorist organizations and government reactions to terrorism.

Drawbacks of Databases

There are several potential problems with the events data base approach. First, there is no guarantee that the same stringent collection standards were used to develop each database. Second, there is no assurance that all the same variables were coded. Third, rarely is the reliability of the source material (e.g., newspapers) questioned or verified. Finally, there is no guarantee that data sets exist for all of the countries under investigation. This kind of research is typically devoid of emotion; it may unnecessarily distance researchers so they will be less attuned to the subtleties of the situation.

Other cautions are in order. It is important that each step be carefully carried out to ensure the quality of the entire project; this will improve the overall accuracy and meaningfulness. Coders must be careful about what sort of actions they include in the data set. For example, can we justifiably say that a terrorist action has occurred if we do not know the perpetrators' intent? Thus, for an act of terrorism to be labeled as such, it depends on the perception of the audience, including that of the coder.

Additionally, most databases include hoaxes and threats. This is problematic because almost anyone can make a phone call and threaten to commit a terrorist act or build something that resembles a bomb. Another issue is that of ecological fallacy: What may seem to make sense in the general case may not be easily translatable to a single incident.

Conclusion

The best way to maximize the utility of data-collection efforts and minimize errors might be to create separate data sets for each country using indigenous (i.e., local) sources (e.g., *Le Monde* for France, *La Prensa* for Spain, etc.) and to then link them with the international databases.

Perhaps the most reliable option would be to create a master or comprehensive database, one that integrates the CIA/State Department data set with those that are linked to country-specific collection efforts. If the Canadian case is illustrative (Ross, 1988b; 1994), then as much as 75 percent of terrorist acts that occur in any given country do not show up in a data set which focuses exclusively on international/transnational terrorism. This would also necessitate a team of researchers who are fluent in the languages of the countries whose news media are to be screened. There is no question that creating a database which quantifies domestic political terrorism would be time-consuming, costly, difficult, and may reify bias.

Until a sufficient number of data sets are combined or until a master one is created, the study of terrorism is hampered. The results of a comparative analysis achieved through cross national studies would permit us to test for systemwide characteristics. While this type of approach would be ideal, it would also tend to be very costly in terms of time and financial resources.³ One must also be mindful of the problem of diminishing returns. Specifically researchers should gage the benefit that will be achieved by combining more and more data bases, especially to minimize the possibility that no event was ignored, against the additional resources that projects of this nature will cost, and the predicted additional reliability and validity that will be afforded.

A satisfying strategy might reduce the costs of such an endeavor. There are several possible cases or countries to study. It would be ideal to examine all of these options, but because the data is very limited or costly to collect, a smaller sample would be preferable. Three frameworks to choose from make for natural compari-

sons: Western nations, Anglo-American democracies, and advanced industrialized democracies.

The first option is Western nations. This term, however, is a bit ambiguous. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, a Western nation is one that is based on "Greco-Roman traditions" (Webster's, 1980: 1321). This type of definition would then preclude nations such as Japan which does not derive from Greco-Roman traditions but has had a substantial amount of terrorism.

The second option would be to look at Anglo American democracies (i.e. the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand). The AngloAmerican democracies are particularly appropriate for a comparative case study. Despite differing political institutions, all four share a common set of underlying political values that emphasize liberalism, individualism, and a willingness to compromise (Alford, 1967: 71). The governmental and electoral systems in each country generally encourage the persistence of a two-party system at the national level, despite frequent electoral interventions from minor or third parties. The style of political leadership tends to be pragmatic, compromise seeking, and non-ideological (Graetz and McAllister, 1987: 45). But most important, is the fact that all have distinctive communal minorities. Despite the similarities between these countries, there have not been any sustained campaigns of terrorism in either Australia or New Zealand.

The final and preferred option is to look at all advanced industrialized democracies where significant campaigns of domestic political terrorism have taken place. Advanced industrialized democracies share general political, economical, and social similarities but are culturally diverse. Terrorism is also particularly disruptive of the normal political process and unexpected in advanced industrialized democracies.

In sum, it is difficult to suggest that either qualitative or quantitative research is more important or more effective. Each serves a specific purpose that is often dependent on what sort of research has been conducted to date, available resources, and the types of questions that are asked. Additionally, mechanisms and protocols should be established, and organizations like Europol or Interpol, or the United Nations should be encouraged to share data amongst terrorism researchers. This may even be coupled with the establishment of a well-funded international center that focuses on terrorism that facilitates data collection and dissemination. Minimizing the concerns listed above and incorporating these suggestions may prove a step in the right direction of providing more comprehensive and rigorous research on terrorism and more informed policy decisions.

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Notes

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2. This paper uses Schmid's 1983 consensus definition of terrorism as its point of departure.
3. There is some attempt to build a comprehensive cross-national database, but details of this are sketchy (LaFree, 2002).

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