Strategic Terrorism: The Framework and its Fallacies

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ABSTRACT This article seeks to lay out a comprehensive framework by which those who utilize a campaign of strategic terrorism seek to attain their ends. It identifies a distinctive modus operandi: 1) disorientation: to alienate the authorities from their citizens, reducing the government to impotence in the eyes of the population; 2) target response: to induce a target to respond in a manner that is favorable to the insurgent cause; 3) gaining legitimacy: to exploit the emotional impact of the violence to insert an alternative political message. By elucidating the strategy of terrorism, the analysis also reveals its inherent limitations. Resting on the premise that a militarily more powerful adversary will in some way feel restrained from bringing the full force of its military superiority to bear, the strategy relies exclusively on the exploitation of the psychological effects of armed action, thereby rendering it vulnerable to those who are willing to view the resolution of clashes of interest principally in terms of the tangibles of military power.

Introduction

Since September 11, 2001, no issue has generated more public interest than terrorism. At the internet bookseller, Amazon, 20,000 books on the topic are currently available, ranging from survival guides to complex post-modernist analyses. Among this flood of (often forgettable) books, what stands out is the absence of any meaningful examination of terrorism as a military strategy. This seems odd given that the restructuring of entire armies is based on the assumption that the ‘new battles’ of the twenty-first century are not going to be fought with tanks and missiles, but ‘by customs officers stopping suspicious
persons at our borders and diplomats securing cooperation against
money laundering'. Of course, there are many good reasons for this
reluctance to engage with terrorism as a strategy. After all, we are
constantly told that the so-called ‘new terrorism’ is nihilist and
irrational, and that attempting to understand its logic would be futile.
Furthermore, there can be no doubt that many among the older
generation of strategists feel more comfortable dealing with the
supposedly purposeful behavior of states, and have therefore focused
on the state’s response rather than on the phenomenon itself.

In our view, the gap in the scholarly literature must be addressed
urgently because the lack of a theoretical framework in which to
understand terrorism leads to questionable assertions about its
practice. There is a tendency to treat terrorism as an aberrant form
of violent activity devoid of any meaning. For example, Bruce Cumings
declared in the wake of September 11 that:

...in its utter recklessness and indifference to consequences, its
craven anonymity, and its lack of any discernible ‘program’ save
for inchoate revenge, this was an apolitical act. The 9/11 attack
had no rational military purpose [because] they lacked the
essential relationship between violent means and political ends
that, as Clausewitz taught us, must govern any act of war.

Elsewhere, terrorism is viewed through the prism of an ideological
showdown between the forces of good and evil. This is most
graphically embodied in the notion of the ‘war against terrorism’.
Other commentators, meanwhile, see terrorism as a matter that is
essentially the product of relative deprivation. Stella Rimington, the
former head of MI5, the British security service, stated that ‘Terrorism
is going to be there for a long time. It’s going to be there as long as
there are people with grievances that they feel terrorism will help
solve’.

It is our contention that terrorism – even that of the supposedly
‘nihilist’ variety – does not necessarily fall within the realm of the
abnormal. Neither should terrorism be employed as an ‘abstract
noun’. For, ultimately, a war against terrorism has no more meaning
than a ‘war against war’ or a ‘war against poverty’ in that it defines no
specific threat or realizable political ends. Nor is terrorism simply an
outgrowth of grievance. Instead, terrorism should more appropriately
be viewed as a military strategy. It is a method that has been employed
by actors who believe, rightly or wrongly, that through such means
they can advance their agenda. It is possible, therefore, to treat
terrorism as a bona fide method for distributing military means to
fulfill the ends of policy. Indeed, the main purpose of this article is to
describe the military dynamics of terrorism and evaluate their effectiveness, as well as to theorize upon – and clarify the correlation between – political ends and terrorist means.

Before doing so, it seems useful to clarify our methodological approach, especially in view of the numerous misconceptions that have been filtered through the popular – as well as some of the more serious – literature. The theoretical model used in this article is that of a non-state terrorist group competing for absolute power with a government against which its efforts are targeted. This is not to say that so-called single-issue terrorists (such as anti-abortionists, animal rights campaigners, etc.) and the issue of state terrorism are less important.10 It just so happens that the ideas and concepts involved remain much the same in each case, and that to constantly separate out each type would make the analysis unnecessarily verbose.

Furthermore, we think that – for analytical as well as practical reasons – it makes sense to begin our evaluation of terrorism by looking at its military content. The starting point will therefore be the theoretical notion of a campaign of ‘strategic terrorism’, that is, one that is based on achieving political effects primarily through terrorist violence. While there is a very substantial number of contemporary terrorist campaigns to which our theoretical model of strategic terrorism can be applied (that of Al Qaeda, for example), we are conscious that there are many groups who combine terrorism with other methods of warfare as well as forms of non-violent social or political agitation. We are of the opinion that only by examining the dynamics of strategic terrorism is it possible to create the necessary conceptual basis from which to arrive at a fuller understanding of the role played by terrorist violence in the campaigns of some of the groups that have gone beyond the use of strategic terrorism in advancing their aims. In fact, we believe that outlining some of the flaws and limitations of strategic terrorism goes some way to explaining why some groups have chosen to broaden their strategy to include some of the elements mentioned above.

Finally, popular notions like terrorism as a strategy of the ‘weak’ and ‘illegitimate’ are often taken as matters of fact without further exploring them. We believe that legitimacy and relative military weakness are important variables in strategic terrorism, and they will play a central part in our analysis. However, instead of assuming these variables to be a conceptual given, we will demonstrate how they relate to, and originate from, the military dynamics of strategic terrorism, thus providing a sound theoretical rationale for their inclusion in a general strategy of terrorism rather than proceeding on the basis of supposedly objective a priori notions of important concepts, which frequently lead to conceptual confusion.
This methodological approach informs the way in which this article is organized. Following an attempt to provide a working definition of strategic terrorism, we will distil its unique modus operandi and then describe the different stages which are essential to its successful conclusion. In the second part, we will demonstrate that strategic terrorism is a potentially flawed strategy, which – except in the most favorable circumstances – is unlikely to achieve the ends for which it is used. Our argument is that actors which see fit to use strategic terrorism need to generate considerable strategic momentum in order to trigger the processes which they hope to exploit. The need to escalate, however, will expose them to a number of adverse responses, which will prevent these actors from acquiring legitimacy in the eyes of their target audience or even cause their own destruction.

Definition

The trouble with terrorism is that most people think they know what it is but few can adequately define it.¹¹ The confusion surrounding the issue stems from a number of sources. The distinctive methods that many of us associate with terrorism involves the willful taking of human life and the infliction of severe mental distress, sometimes entailing, whether randomized or calculated, attacks on the innocent. Naturally, for many this introduces an ethical dimension and raises all the questions relating to concepts like just war and non-combatant immunity.¹² Furthermore, because terrorism is not considered to be value neutral, the word itself becomes an object for contention among conflicting parties in a conflict. Political conflicts are struggles for power and influence, and part of that struggle is about who labels whom. Since power tends to be largely concentrated in the hands of states, it is normally they who are able to attach the meaning to certain forms of political behavior, which is why state terror is often ignored in studies of terrorism.¹³ The result of this conceptual mess is that – in trying to tie terrorism down for academic analysis – the word has been all but defined out of existence. Certainly the writers of this article know of no meaningful conclusion reached using these approaches.¹⁴

We do not believe that the definitional problem, which has haunted (as well as hindered) research on the subject for many decades, can be resolved through our contribution. Nevertheless, we would contend that – strictly for the purposes of this analysis – it is possible to describe terrorism as the deliberate creation of a sense of fear, usually by the use or threat of use of symbolic acts of physical violence, to influence the political behavior of a given target group. This definition draws on the work by T.P. Thornton, whose main study – although 40 years
old – still forms one of the most informative and insightful analyses of terrorism. It highlights three facets of the phenomenon:

1. The violent quality of most terrorist acts, which distinguishes a program of terror from other forms of non-violent propagation, such as mass demonstrations, leafleting, etc. Indeed, although people will sometimes experience fear and anxiety without the threat of physical harm being present, it appears to be the case that the most common vehicle for the inducement of terror is forms of physical violence.
2. The nature of the violence itself. Thornton calls it ‘extra-normal’, meaning that for a certain level of organized political violence to be called terrorism, it must go beyond the norms of violent political agitation accepted by a particular society.
3. The symbolic character of the violent act. An act of terror will imply a broader meaning than the immediate effects of the act itself; that is to say, the damage, deaths and injuries caused by the act are of limited relevance to the political message which the terrorist hopes to communicate. For this reason, the terrorist act can only be understood by appreciating its symbolic content or ‘message’.

A significant problem regarding this definition of terrorism concerns the subjective nature of the emotional phenomenon of terror itself. Almost all of us have different ideas of what constitutes fear. Our thresholds of terror are likely to differ. As we will see, a terrorist can quite easily create an atmosphere of defiance rather than fear and anxiety. Neither are our thresholds of terror absolute and unchanging. A feeling of terror may dissipate the longer a terrorist campaign goes on giving rise to an atmosphere of indifference. Likewise, the sensation of terror may be influenced by the perception of the justness of the cause accorded to the actions of the terrorist by the affected populace. In that sense, we may end up back in the old dilemma of having to describe terrorism by context and notions of morality. There is, it seems, no easy way out of the terrorist enigma.

The Strategy of Terrorism

While a definition may help us to identify some of the essential ‘ingredients’ of terrorism, it tells us little about its dynamics. In this section, we aim to establish the unique modus operandi of strategic terrorism. This will be done by detailing the process whereby terrorists seek to manipulate particular variables in order to satisfy their political demands. To show how this process is distinctive, we will begin by clarifying the location of strategic terrorism within the wider spectrum of military strategies.
As indicated above, terrorism – like most forms of organized political violence – is employed to produce certain effects on a specific set of people in order to attain an objective of policy. Unlike conventional warfare, however, the aim of a strategy of terrorism is not to kill or destroy but to break the spirit and create a sensation of fear within a target group, which will cause it to initiate political change. Terrorism, therefore, is a particular form of psychological warfare; a battle of wills played out in people’s minds. It can thus be regarded as a prime example of coercive diplomacy, where the terrorist group seeks to deprive the enemy of things which he holds dear, not necessarily in terms of material resources, but those more elusive aspects of life such as a relatively peaceful, stable and law abiding society.

In this regard, terrorism bears many similarities to forms of guerrilla warfare. Terrorism and guerrilla warfare are both dedicated to triggering the asking of a question on the part of the target group: ‘is it worth paying the price to maintain the present situation?’ The aim will be to raise this ‘price’ to a level whereby the opponent returns to re-examine the notion of vital interest. Historically, this process could be observed in many anti-colonial conflicts in which violence was used in order to trigger a reassessment of values in the colonial metropolis. As the cost of maintenance came to outweigh the benefits, the target’s perception changed from a determination to preserve what was considered to be an asset to a willingness to give it up. This idea has been embodied in the concept of the ‘asset to liability shift’, whereby the ‘asset’ at the centre of a conflict does not inevitably relate to some territorial possession, but can also refer to something more intangible, such as a policy or ideology.

Whereas terrorism and guerrilla warfare share the same objectives and while both are commonly seen as members of one strategic family loosely referred to as ‘irregular’ warfare, the means to those ends differ radically, and it is here that we can discern a unique terrorist modus operandi. Much guerrilla warfare theorizing, particularly those ideas that have been filtered through Maoist and Leninist understandings, emphasizes the involvement of the masses through political organization which in many respects is considered even more important than the military struggle itself. Moreover, Maoist theory postulates that the slow accumulation of military assets is necessary in order to meet enemy forces on equal terms in set-piece battles of a conventional nature in the final phase of the confrontation. By contrast, those groups which employ terrorism as the main plank of their strategy – ‘strategic terrorists’ – seek to bypass both the mass agitation and conventional military elements of guerrilla warfare theory, believing that the use of symbolic violence alone will be sufficient to achieve the desired political ends. The process whereby they hope to achieve their
aims can be thought of as involving three stages, which will be elaborated upon in the following.

Stage 1: Disorientation

While the first modern terrorists – the Russian anarchists of the late nineteenth century – believed that carrying out a few daring acts of violence would be sufficient to incite the masses to rise up and bring down the government, most contemporary terrorists have come to recognize that the status quo usually tends to favor the government as it controls the organs of power, and because it will therefore be regarded as the primary provider of stability and security by the vast majority of the population. As long as this remains the case, it will be difficult for the terrorists to be seen as anything but an anti-social element, bringing death and destruction to a hitherto stable society. The strategic terrorists’ initial task is therefore to change this perception by undermining the psychological bond which binds the population to the regime. To use Thornton’s terminology, the terrorists must attempt to remove the ‘structural supports’ which give a society its strength and cohesion.

In this respect, disorientation is the key objective. The terrorists hope that their actions will alienate the authorities by portraying them as impotent in the defense of their citizens. To achieve this, those who adopt a program of terrorism need to disrupt the normal patterns of social interaction by escalating the violence to a level where it appears that the authorities are unable to prevent the spread of chaos. Further, by sowing division, destroying cooperation and interdependence, and replacing stability with suspicion and mistrust, the terrorists aim to isolate the individual from the regime and his environment. The victim becomes concerned merely with his own survival, unable to identify the source of his fears. Having thus detached the individual from his social moorings, the terrorists hope that he will become susceptible to the alternative political program offered by the terrorists and that, at the very least, a sizeable proportion of the population will align itself with them, if only by remaining neutral in the struggle.

Something of a paradox emerges here. If we assume a degree of rationality on behalf of the terrorists, we might imagine that – being interested in winning the support of the masses – they would prefer not to carry out indiscriminate attacks because most societies put a premium on the sanctity of human life, especially those people who are deemed to be uninvolved in the conflict. And indeed, in most cases, terrorists will make an attempt to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate targets. Legitimate targets, which typically include the institutions and the representatives of the state (politicians, officials,
military personnel, policemen, judges, etc.) can be rationalized as agents of repression and, to that extent, attacks on them will represent a discriminate targeting policy. Still, continual attacks against specific targets will tend to make the threat predictable, diminishing the sense of fear as the bulk of the target group may come to feel sufficiently removed from the campaign of violence to experience a high degree of threat. It is precisely in order to create an atmosphere of terror and disorientation, to get an audience and to gain political leverage, that terrorists will feel the need to transcend established ethical barriers. Hence, a measure of indiscrimination, or at least the appearance of indiscrimination, is extremely important in order to shatter the psychological defenses of those who have escaped the immediate physical consequences of a terrorist attack – a breaking of the notion that ‘it couldn’t happen to me’.

While this scenario sounds far-fetched, there are numerous examples – both historical and current – which illustrate the effectiveness of strategic terrorism in causing disorientation through more or less indiscriminate acts of violence. In 1957, the Algerian Front de la Libération Nationale (FLN) massacred a group of villagers at Melouza for supporting a rival nationalist group. The FLN denied responsibility for the atrocity and placed the blame on the French authorities. Since the French themselves were responsible for many atrocities against Algerians, most Algerians preferred to believe the FLN’s version of events. Paradoxically, therefore, the legitimacy of French rule in Algeria was undermined by an atrocity that had been carried out by Paris’ staunchest enemy. Likewise, US forces were blamed for the terrorist bombing of a police station in Baghdad in July 2004, because American planes had been seen flying over the city at the time of the explosion. According to a news report, within minutes, crowds assembled, ‘appearing angry and aggrieved, insisting that those killed were martyrs of American aggression’. Even once it had become clear that Iraqi terrorists, not American forces, had been responsible for the attack, Arabic television channels continued to blame the coalition forces, arguing that they were not doing enough to provide security. Again, the result was a loss of legitimacy and credibility for the authorities, not the terrorists who had actually committed the assault.

These examples hint at one of the key variables which may determine how successful the terrorists will be at undermining the psychological bond between the population and the authorities. Clearly, when a government enjoys little popular legitimacy and is widely suspected to act contrary to the interests of the population, the terrorists will find it much easier to replace the idea of the government as a provider of security and stability. This explains why strategic terrorism has been particularly successful when the target government was a colonial or
occupying power, such as in Algeria. Moreover, because the target group is different from the one whose allegiance the terrorists hope to gain, there will be little compunction about widening one’s definition of legitimate targets, especially if the terrorist attacks occur in what is believed to be the colonial metropolis. As a by-product, indiscriminate attacks against a foreign enemy may also have the effect of invigorating adherents to the terrorists’ cause: sympathizers will see such attacks as a sign of strength and defiance, and this might compel them to take up arms themselves in order to become part of what seems like an inevitable victory. In this type of situation, therefore, acts of terrorist violence may not only cause disorientation and deepen the populace’s alienation from the authorities but in fact inspire the uprising of the masses which the Russian anarchists had envisaged. This, indeed, could be thought of as the rationale for Al Qaeda’s current campaign. On the one hand, Osama bin Laden and his affiliates aim to trigger disorientation, chaos and civil strife in secular Arab countries like Egypt by launching more or less indiscriminate attacks against government targets, foreign commercial installations, etc. On the other hand, believing that Western – and especially American – military, political and financial support is the key element which sustains many of these regimes, they have set out to strike blows at the Western ‘metropolis’. This, they think, will not only drive a wedge between the Arab governments and their Western sponsors, but also incite latent militants to follow their example and commit themselves to the jihad.

In its first stage, therefore, the strategy of terrorism primarily aims at overturning the most basic expectations of order and societal interaction, leaving the individual confused, fearful and alienated. To complete this process, however, those who employ strategic terrorism crucially depend on the inadvertent help of the target government. This represents the second stage of a terrorist campaign, which will be examined in the following section.

Stage 2: Target Response

As noted above, terrorism is frequently described as a strategy chosen by the ‘weak’, because its proponents are conscious that they lack the firepower necessary to stand a chance in a direct, conventional confrontation. This often leads to the seemingly straightforward conclusion that the terrorists need to appeal to ‘hearts and minds’ and generate political strength in order to compensate for their military weakness. In our view, this way of looking at terrorism prevents a full understanding of the military dynamics of terrorist violence. It ignores an important element of any terrorist strategy, which is to set
the target a series of (military) dilemmas and then challenge it to react. Indeed, it is our contention that – before setting out to win support for one’s alternative political program – strategic terrorism relies on the target to respond in a way which unwittingly undermines its own authority.

N.O. Berry put forward a number of hypotheses that provide an idea as to what effects the terrorists hope to achieve to manipulate their enemy’s response.\(^{33}\) The first hypothesis is the concept of *target overreaction*, which constitutes an essential part of the process of disorientation (see above). The terrorists want to goad the government into operating beyond the legally constituted methods and into using extra-legal action. As a result, terrorist acts will often be committed with the express purpose of triggering reprisals of a heavy-handed and possibly illegal nature.\(^{34}\) Yet, even if it does not get drawn into excessive force, the government may have to rely on special police and judicial measures which will impinge on everyday life and inconvenience the ordinary citizen. The arch exponent of this theory, Carlos Marighella, was forthright on this point: he believed that curfews, roadblocks, house searches, internment without trial, state-sponsored death squads and the like would make life unbearable for the ordinary citizen and cause him to turn against the government *irrespective* of whether the terrorists had made any effort at mass agitation or introduced themselves and their political ideas to the population.\(^{35}\)

Berry suggests that most governments will be tempted to overreact because they tend to have an acute self-image, believing that they possess overwhelming power as well as the legitimacy to crush any challenge to its authority, and viewing the terrorists as evil. Such perceptions were evident in the response of some Latin American governments towards terrorist challenges during the 1960s and 1970s. They could also be detected in the US and Soviet reactions to the insurgencies faced in Vietnam and Afghanistan respectively. The dehumanizing of the ‘communists’ and ‘imperialists’ justified free-fire zones and village-raiding. Yet, despite the massive resources fielded against the insurgents, they were unable to bring the conflict to a satisfactory conclusion. Rather, the overreactive nature of their counter-insurgency campaigns had de-legitimized the cause for which they fought, thereby increasing support for the rebels.\(^{36}\)

The second hypothesis – *power deflation* – represents the opposite of target overreaction. This is a scenario where a target loses public support because it appears incapable of dealing adequately with a terrorist threat. The target believes it lacks a public consensus for its policy in dealing with a terrorist opponent it sees as cunning, formidable and even possessing a degree of legitimacy. Although the target possesses greater power than the terrorists, it will therefore be
wary of taking a hard line, as it believes the terrorists to be skilful and audacious enough to try to match any counter terrorist action with an even more spectacular reaction. In effect, the target is a prisoner of its own conscience. It wants to be seen to be acting correctly and not overreacting; yet by doing so, it prevents the implementation of an adequate anti-terrorist program which could deal effectively with the insurgent violence. This is the classic dilemma which many regimes, particularly those of a liberal democratic persuasion, are faced with in dealing with a terrorist challenge: how to balance civil liberties and accepted norms of legitimate conduct with adequate security measures to deal with a significant threat to its authority.

Another type of response is the so-called *failed repression of the moderates*. During a terrorist campaign, the target government may choose to suppress moderate, non-violent opposition. Such repression could take the form of banning political parties, closing critical newspapers, or even the arrest, torture and killing of moderates. The problem is that if the repression is not efficient, ruthless and total, there is a risk that the surviving moderates will become more extreme. Believing that there will be little value in seeking compromise within the present system, the moderates may then be driven into joining those members of the opposition who seek a violent solution. The most rational explanation for pursuing any such policy is that the target recognizes the potential of an emerging coalition between extremists and moderates, and that it wants to forestall this possibility while the relative capabilities are still in its favor. In suppressing the moderates, however, it actually helps to make its ‘nightmare scenario’ a reality. The fall of the Shah of Iran provides a good example.

SAVAK, the Shah’s secret police, was thoroughly inefficient in repressing the opponents of the regime which allowed opposition groups to coalesce against the regime. In mid-1978 the opposition was such that the Shah believed it necessary to attack a moderate protest rally in central Tehran with the result that up to 1,000 protesters were killed. This event crystallized all factions against him and he was overthrown shortly afterwards.

The so-called *appeasement of the moderates* is the fourth hypothesis Berry suggests. A political authority may come to believe that a terrorist insurgency is caused by legitimate grievances. The target attempts to introduce reforms to redress these grievances in the hope that doing so will undercut support for the terrorists and dissuade the moderates from being attracted to violent action. The underlying idea is that isolating the hard-liners from the moderates will make it easier for the target to crack down on the terrorists, as they will be deprived of the shelter they may have been afforded by the moderates. However, this policy entails a number of dangers.
First, the reforms will be interpreted by the terrorists as a sign of weakness, and they will therefore be encouraged to step up their campaign to force the target to capitulate to all of their political demands.  

Second, the target may isolate the traditional supporters of the regime who believe that the appeasement of moderates is tantamount to giving in to the terrorists. This may lead to the emergence of reactionary ‘pro-state terrorists’, who will complicate the target’s overall position by creating yet another violent challenge to its authority. Examples include the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS) during the Algerian war of independence, the various Loyalist factions in Northern Ireland, as well as the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

Needless to say, in most situations, the government would be well-advised to avoid both over- and under-reaction, and practice a sensible policy mix of reforms and firmness. This, however, is easier said than done. Whenever governments are challenged by a terrorist campaign, the target needs to determine the relative strengths and weaknesses of the insurgent movement, and – because its authority is being challenged – it must also examine its own vulnerabilities and calculate the likely effects of the options open to it. Of course, this greater intellectual burden for the government means that the potential to make analytical and policy mistakes is greater too. Indeed, it is these opportunities that the terrorists will be waiting to exploit.

Stage 3: Gaining Legitimacy

Having alienated the individual from the government, the terrorists need to hold out an attractive vision of a ‘new’ legitimacy. In many ways, this represents the most important, yet also most difficult, stage in a campaign of strategic terrorism. Most regimes will be able to withstand the attacks of a small band of conspirators – it is only when the majority of people transcends the state of disorientation and begins to lend support to the terrorists that terrorism becomes an existential threat.

One of the main obstacles to any terrorist in effecting the shift from ‘old’ to ‘new’ legitimacy is the transmission of their political message. Where a society does not permit free and uninhibited transmission of information, the insurgents will be unable to advertise their vision of a new society, as all the channels of mass communication are controlled by the authorities. In some cases, the terrorist acts themselves will go unreported, thus negating the psychological effect of terrorism beyond those directly affected. Even in democracies, it is not all plain sailing. The vast bulk of the media is likely to be concentrated in the hands of a
few media entrepreneurs, who have – by and large – benefited from the status quo and are unlikely to desire any change. Also, with its accumulated expertise and free access to the media, the government will be able to put its ‘spin’ on events while the terrorists may be in no position to answer any of the charges thrown at them.43

There are, in principle, two ways in which this barrier can be overcome. The first is through the skilful manipulation of the media. Sophisticated terrorists will recognize that there is a potentially symbiotic relationship between themselves and the media. All they need to do is to satisfy the media’s appetite for a ‘good story’, which means providing the ‘mystery, quick action, tension [and] drama’ for which the big television networks are longing.44 Indeed, this may be one of the reasons why hostage-takings have proved such a popular tactic. While inducing a high and sustained level of terror, they rarely end up with large numbers of casualties. Most importantly, hijackings provide days – if not weeks – of prime time news coverage. During this period, the terrorists will be granted endless opportunities to explain the rationale of their campaign.45

However, even the most seamless dissemination of one’s political vision will not guarantee success. After all, just because a terrorist group is successful in transmitting its political message to the general public through the media does not mean that anyone will be persuaded. It is at this stage of a terrorist campaign that ideology becomes a crucial factor. The ideology of an insurgent movement offers a critique of the existing order, and it articulates an alternative set of values and beliefs. It rationalizes grievances against the prevailing order and legitimizes violent action. Most importantly, though, it determines the potential level of popular support, and will therefore ultimately affect the ability of those who employ terrorism to gain sufficient legitimacy to be recognized as an alternative provider of authority. In this respect, the most advantageous scenario for the terrorists occurs when the revolutionary ideology is already widely disseminated amongst the population, so that – when the revolt breaks out – the terrorists are accorded an instant legitimacy. This tends to be the case when their ideology is based on strong pre-existing sources of identity, such as nationality, ethnicity or religion. It has proved to be more difficult when the terrorists have espoused purely political ideologies, such as Marxism or fascism.46

One of the best examples of successful media manipulation is that provided by the 1970 October crisis, when the Canadian Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) kidnapped a British diplomat as well as the Deputy Prime Minister of Quebec.47 By issuing a series of communiqués to the media, which (apparently) leapt at the chance to broadcast them, the terrorists were able to gain maximum publicity for
their demands. The terrorists deliberately ignored the Canadian government’s request to negotiate through an intermediary, preferring to communicate to the authorities via the media, thus ensuring the highest possible profile for the negotiations which in itself appeared to confer a degree of recognition and legitimacy on the FLQ. Moreover, the group’s manifesto struck an emotional chord among many ordinary Quebecois. More than 50 per cent of callers on Radio Canada were sympathetic. Influential intellectuals issued a statement giving implicit support for the FLQ’s aims. Thousands of students in the province staged rallies and demonstrations. The original issue – the kidnappings of the two men – had become secondary to a much wider debate concerning the limits of provincial government and the legitimacy of Quebec’s nationalist aspirations.48

The second way in which legitimacy can be acquired is by disseminating one’s message directly, that is, through grassroots political agitation. Although the Internet may offer a range of opportunities for doing so clandestinely, in most cases – and especially in countries where Internet access remains the privilege of the educated few – this still entails the need for a more or less open political organization, which works to broaden the support for the terrorist group through active involvement in the community. Apart from sustaining the existing political backing, political front groups may therefore mobilize sections of the population that had previously not been thought of as susceptible to the group’s ideology. These people may be drawn into the movement by a charismatic local leader or the services provided by the political front organizations. As an added benefit, the grassroots organizations can be useful in providing quasi-military support to the military cells, such as intelligence, shelter and supplies. If the support is concentrated in particular regions or areas of a city, these locations may become ‘no go’ areas in which the terrorists can organize and recruit freely.

There are numerous examples of terrorist groups that have successfully established political front organizations in order to consolidate and broaden their support. In Western Europe, this has mostly been in the form of political parties, such as Heri Batasuna (the political wing of the Basque terrorist organization ETA) and Sinn Fein (the IRA’s political front). In the Middle East, on the other hand, terrorist groups have set up extensive welfare networks, including hospitals, kindergartens and schools. Terrorist organizations like Hamas in the Palestinian territories and Hezbollah in Lebanon have thus been able to grow into genuine mass movements that command a large and relatively stable political constituency.49

Grassroots political agitation can undoubtedly be effective. However, it raises the question if – at this stage – the activity of a terrorist
group can still be described as strategic terrorism. After all, one of the
central tenets of this strategy is that calculated terrorist violence alone is
sufficient to bring about political change. By engaging in long-term
grassroots activism, the terrorists suggest that mass organization – as
proposed by Mao and others – is a necessary requirement for political
success, and that the utility of terrorism is limited in gaining legitimacy.
Indeed, by shifting their focus from acts of terrorism to political
agitation, they concede that all that strategic terrorism can ever hope
for is to destroy the legitimacy of the existing regime and thus create an
opening for new political actors, but that terrorist violence will at some
point have to give way, allowing more conventional forms of struggle
to emerge. The wider question, therefore, seems obvious: what are the
limitations of strategic terrorism?

The Limitations of Strategic Terrorism

As mentioned above, the central objective of most terrorist organiza-
tions is to drain the political authority of the target, undermine its
ability to maintain the allegiance of its people and prevent it from
responding adequately to the terrorist challenge. The eventual purpose
of doing so is to erode the target’s legitimacy and replace it with that of
the insurgents. It is easy to reduce terrorist struggles to these
few semantic equations, but they hide a myriad of practical and
analytical problems. The main problem with the strategy of terrorism
concerns the very element which is meant to make terrorism such a
potent weapon, the manipulation of the psychology of fear. In this
respect, terrorism is based on a series of assumptions about individual,
collective and institutional behavior under stress which are either false
or wholly unproven. In the following, we will first address the
assumptions we believe to be the most doubtful, and then show how, as
a result, terrorist strategies are likely to end up in either defeat or
irrelevance.

Assumptions

One of the key assumptions of strategic terrorism is that the target
group’s determination to hold on to a particular policy or possession
will collapse once it has been exposed to terrorist violence. This
assumption is based on the colonial experience, when terrorists
demonstrated that the will of the target group can be undermined,
government repression induced and support for the terrorist cause
gained. As noted above, situations of foreign occupation are by far the
most favorable from the terrorists’ point of view, because the
authorities’ legitimacy can be assumed to be very low to begin with.
In our view, it is highly questionable whether these conditions can easily be imitated in different contexts.

Furthermore, even during the period of de-colonization, contexts varied widely. Rather than merely relying on the correct application of certain military mechanics, the insurgents’ success depended on a full appreciation of the specific political and even cultural circumstances within which the campaign was taking place. For instance, it would have been inadequate if the Algerian FLN had calculated that all they needed to do to get the French to leave Algeria would be to increase the violence to the level of that inflicted by Jewish terrorist groups on the British, which is regarded as a factor that induced Britain to evacuate Palestine. Undoubtedly, this would have caused the French a large measure of inconvenience but it would have never forced them to leave Algeria. The nature of the relationship that France had with her colonies was altogether different from Britain’s. For many, Algeria was an extension of metropolitan France and a strong emotional attachment had developed and ingrained itself into the French psyche in the form of Algérie française. It was the prime task of the rebels to break this psychological bond, not just to escalate the violence to a particular level. In terms of military dynamics, this meant that the FLN strategy had to sustain a high and widespread level of violence for a considerable period of time while being prepared to endure enormous losses themselves.

Removing an independent, indigenous government is even less clear-cut. On the one hand, the target is going to be more determined to resist, as its core interest – that is, its own survival – is threatened. More importantly, in contrast to an anti-colonial situation in which a wide cross-section of the community will be latently sympathetic to the terrorists’ cause, the population is likely to be divided between backers and opponents of the terrorists’ cause. As a consequence, those who utilize terrorist methods need to minimize civilian casualties in order not to alienate support, which in turn will make it more difficult to develop the dynamics of violence necessary to unleash the sense of fear and terror that will trigger the anticipated disorientation and eventual transfer of legitimacy. Indeed, while most societies – like most people – have some psychological breaking point, the abject failure of contemporary terrorists to achieve their political aims demonstrates that most terrorist groups grossly underestimate the scale of violence needed to reach this point.

The second assumption, which we consider overly optimistic, relates to the idea that a terrorist campaign will instill a degree of fear within the target population. In fact, even if the terrorists manage to generate an atmosphere of fear and apprehension, this will not necessarily be channeled in the direction the terrorists would hope. Instead of
becoming disoriented, the public may blame the terrorists for the deteriorating situation; and rather than being alienated by the repressive reaction of the regime, the counter-terrorist measures may turn out to have the full support of the people. Therefore, far from estranging the people from state structures, it is the terrorists who become alienated and repudiated. In that sense, a terrorist campaign may reinforce people’s faith in the government and increase their reliance on the state, which is exactly the reverse of what the terrorists want to happen. A good example is the British public’s response to the IRA’s so-called England campaign, which aimed at weakening the resolve to uphold British sovereignty over Northern Ireland. As it turned out, whenever the IRA committed atrocities in England, there emerged a strong notion of defiance, that is, that one must not ‘give in to terrorists’. When asked what effect IRA bombs had, only 28 per cent of the respondents to a 1984 MORI poll declared that they were more likely to support British withdrawal, while a majority (53 per cent) favored ‘tougher action’.

Another possible effect of a terrorist campaign – especially if it goes on for an extended period – is that, far from creating and sustaining an atmosphere of terror, a climate of indifference arises. Constant acts of terror may simply numb the public to a point where they are prepared to tolerate a degree of terrorism just as they may tolerate a degree of crime, deaths through road accidents and other abnormal events. In this context, terrorism becomes meaningless, as it loses its symbolism, its unpredictability and therefore its power to terrify. Grant Wardlaw investigated this aspect of the terrorist phenomenon by looking at some studies of individual reactions to stress cause by air raids in World War Two. These studies revealed that people who suffered personal loss, injury and narrow escape were caused considerable psychological stress. However, they also revealed that those who were not directly affected became anaesthetized to the bombing. This tends to confirm that people can adjust to even high levels of violence and physical threat.

Furthermore, the longer a terrorist campaign goes on, not only will the power to terrify be diminished, but its propaganda will also become less effective. Of course, there is always the option of engaging in highly indiscriminate attacks, which will guarantee widespread and attentive media coverage regardless of how long a campaign had been going on. At the same time, when carried out in the ‘gaining legitimacy’ stage of a terrorist campaign, the large-scale killing of civilians will focus public attention on the purely negative aspects of a campaign to the exclusion of the presumably ‘positive’ political message that the terrorists will hope to project. Rather than helping to make the terrorists’ cause more popular, one may speculate that such attacks would enable the target to ‘turn the tables’ and crush the conspirators. On the other hand, the
propaganda yield of low-risk operations will dissipate over time with the eventual result that people may simply ignore the terrorists. As a result, the terrorists will face a difficult task convincing the public of the justice of their cause while maintaining the strategic momentum. Indeed, it is this latent contradiction between military needs, capabilities and desired impact that creates severe and continued dilemmas, which we will deal with next.

The Escalation Trap

In terms of military dynamics, for a group that practices strategic terrorism to achieve maximum effectiveness, its campaign must be sudden, brutal, unpredictable and indiscriminate. The aim must be to shock, disorientate and psychologically bludgeon a target group into submission in the shortest possible time. To allow a campaign to become extended or escalate incrementally may provide enough time for the target group to re-orientate itself and to adapt and accept a new level of violence. Therefore, if a campaign becomes prolonged, there is only one option open to the terrorists to maintain any sort of coherence to their strategy, and that is to escalate the campaign to a new, higher level of destruction sufficient to maintain a sense of terror. If they are to have any expectation of victory, they must be prepared to continually escalate the conflict at each stage in order to prevent re-orientation.

The need to escalate, however, raises a number of difficulties.

First, it is doubtful whether terrorist organizations possess the necessary capabilities to increase the scale of violence to unacceptable levels. Not only is it likely that organizations will lack the personnel, logistical and financial support to maintain the military momentum, but the probability of factional divisions is liable to limit any attempt at escalation.

Second, there is the constant danger that brutal and indiscriminate violence will lead to an erosion of public sympathy. If the various stages of a terrorist campaign are designed to overcome the latent contradiction between engaging in more or less indiscriminate violence and the attempt to gain legitimacy, the need for escalation is bound to intensify this paradox.

The third – and possibly most significant – danger is that any effort to escalate a terrorist campaign may provoke counter-escalation from the target government, which will result in the destruction of the insurgent movement. The dilemma here is that, while the terrorists need to elicit an inefficient act of repression that will highlight the ‘unjust’ nature of the regime, any belligerent that faces a militarily more potent adversary has to take extreme care not to push the enemy into a corner to a point where it feels sufficiently desperate to escalate the war to a level at
which the repression becomes ruthless and total, thus threatening the terrorist group’s very existence. The terrorist experience in Latin America provides some poignant examples. Initially, the terrorist campaigns in Argentina and Uruguay provoked an incompetent as well as inefficient response on behalf of their respective governments. Yet, in both countries, there appeared to be a point when the inefficient repression stopped and the brutal repression began. Fearful of the deteriorating situation and of the revolutionary goals of the terrorists, important interest groups – normally the armed forces backed by large sections of the community – took over and carried out a more rigorous counter-terrorist policy. Even if some people disapproved of the methods, the terrorist movements in question were unable to survive the concerted onslaught which followed their decision to escalate. A similar response pattern could be observed in Egypt. Following years of unrest and sporadic terrorist violence, including a near-successful attempt to assassinate President Hosni Mubarak, the terrorist campaign of various Islamist factions reached its height with the massacre of 60 people – most of them tourists – at Luxor in November 1997. This attack had resulted from a conscious decision to escalate the campaign. However, rather than forcing a political crisis that would lead to the downfall of the secular regime, the government embarked on a campaign of full-scale repression. Striking back at the various Islamist factions with brute force, the Egyptian security forces managed to destroy some of the smaller groups, and rendered the capabilities of the others ineffective. 

These examples lead us to an important insight, which helps to establish a key correlation between military and political dynamics in any campaign of strategic terrorism. Because the terrorists have to exercise caution for fear of inducing a response that will destroy them, they would have to empathize with their enemy in order to understand the sort of pressures which impinge upon their decision making. The terrorists would need to assess the limit to which a target might be able to concede without alienating important political constituencies, how favorably it would respond to compromise and what its reactions to increased military pressure are likely to be. In other words, they would have to engage in an ongoing analysis of their own strategic position, and be ready to adjust their means in the light of changing military and political conditions more appropriate to their ends. While some sub-revolutionary terrorists may be capable of forming such judgments (indeed, they may have adopted sub-revolutionary goals precisely because they realize that they are unlikely to win against a stronger opponent), most revolutionary terrorists – especially those of an absolutist variety, such as religiously-inspired insurgents – are not. For them, there can be no question of compromise within the prevailing
order. The only satisfactory outcome is complete victory and the transformation of the political system.\textsuperscript{58}

As a consequence, terrorist campaigns usually take one of two possible turns. The terrorists who are either incapable of increasing the violence or careful not to fall into the ‘escalation trap’ are likely to lose strategic momentum and get bogged down in drawn-out low-level campaigns which never achieves the impetus necessary to bring about political change. Those, however, who manage to escalate their campaigns will face internal divisions, a hostile reaction from the population in whose name they claim to act, and may invite their own destruction by provoking a ruthless and effective campaign of repression from the target government.

Conclusion

Often the notion of terrorism is employed either as an empty rhetorical noun or dismissed as an aberrant form of behavior without any rational explanation. Yet the employment of organized armed force, no matter how deviant or apolitical it may appear, will invariably be undertaken to achieve a particular set of goals. This analysis has sought to lay out a strategic framework by which those who utilize a campaign of terrorism seek to attain their ends through military means. In doing so, this study has identified a distinctive modus operandi that points at the dynamics a strategy of terrorism will seek to unleash in order to further political and military objectives:

1. Disorientation: to alienate the authorities from their citizens, reducing the government to impotence in the eyes of the population, which will be perceived as unable to cope with a situation of evolving chaos.
2. Target response: to induce a government to respond in a manner that is favorable to the insurgent cause such as provoking it into actions that are illegal or regarded as repressive overreactions that destroy the political middle-ground.
3. Gaining legitimacy: to exploit the emotional impact of the violence to insert an alternative political message and seek to broaden support, often through the media or political front organizations.

In highlighting the military dynamics that arise during these phases, we were able to derive some of the key variables that interact with the terrorist application of military force, and shed some light on the relationship between ends and means in strategic terrorism. For example, rather than simply stating that terrorism is a strategy of the ‘weak’ and ‘illegitimate’ as a matter of fact, our analysis made it possible...
to explain how legitimacy and military weakness influence the military dynamics of a terrorist group at the different stages of its strategic evolution, and how they may condition its overall success. In this regard, we were also able to explain why terrorist groups may at some point have to resort to grassroots agitation in order to gain legitimacy, thus diluting the reliance on strategic terrorism as the main plank of their strategy.

Throughout this assessment we have endeavored to show that this framework does not exist purely as a theoretical hypothesis. We have sought to empirically validate this framework by demonstrating that groups have employed terrorist means in the manner described above to facilitate their goals through a rational calculation of the utility of their methods. At the same time, by elucidating the strategy of terrorism, the analysis reveals not only the instrumentality of terrorist methods but also their inherent limitations. The potential fallacies stem primarily from the fact that terrorism relies on inducing a reaction in the target that is favorable to the terrorists’ goals. Strategic terrorism, therefore, rests on a series of assumptions about how a target audience will respond to a campaign of terrorist violence. The success of a terrorist strategy is thus crucially dependent on the wider context of a conflict. If the target population is prepared to endure a campaign of terror, then its potency will be eroded – terrorism will lose its power to terrify. Or, even worse for the terrorists, the lack of target reaction leads to an escalation in the terror campaign which provokes a backlash of such ferocity that the terrorists themselves are unable to survive the ‘overreaction’ that they wish to induce in their opponent.

In this respect, the main weakness in any terrorist campaign is that it seeks to overcome deficiencies in military power by the manipulation of the emotional impact of (usually) relatively small-scale attacks. The strategy rests on the premise that a militarily more powerful adversary will in some way feel restrained, either for political or moral reasons, from bringing the full force of its military superiority to bear on its inferior enemy. Herein lies the main flaw in the strategy of terrorism: it relies exclusively on the exploitation of the psychological rather than the destructive effects of armed action, thereby rendering it vulnerable to those who are willing to view the resolution of clashes of interest principally in terms of the tangibles of military power.

The philosopher of war, Carl von Clausewitz, whose writings are seen, wrongly, by many contemporary analysts as having little to say on the current condition of an international environment characterized by an increasing recourse to terrorist violence, presciently observed: ‘If the political aims [in war] are small, the motives slight and tensions low, a prudent general may look for any way to avoid major crises and decisive actions, exploit any weaknesses in the opponent’s military and political
strategy, and reach a political settlement’.59 This encapsulates the primary elements in a strategy of terrorism: namely, that if the goals of a combatant are relatively limited and do not affect issues of national survival then they may be able to attain their objectives through less direct means than destroying an opponent’s means of resistance (that is, the adversary’s armed forces). As Clausewitz noted, if the general’s ‘assumptions are sound and promise success we are not entitled to criticize him’. ‘But’, as Clausewitz went on to caution, ‘he must never forget he is moving on a devious path where the god of war may catch him unawares.’60

Notes
11 Ibid., pp.5–6.
See, for example, Eqbal Ahmad and David Barsmain, *Terrorism: Theirs and Ours* (New York: Seven Stories Press 2001).


Ernest Evans, *Calling a Truce to Terror* (Westport, CO: Greenwood Press 1979) p.29.


This idea became known as the ‘propaganda of the deed’. See Peter Kropotkin, *Paroles d’un Revolte* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion 1885) p.286.


See, for example, Crenshaw, ‘The Logic of Terrorism’ (note 5) pp.13–15.


Leonard Weinberg found that terrorism is more likely to occur in democracies than in non-democracies, but also that it is ‘weak repressive’ regimes rather than those that are ruthless and total which provide a breeding ground for terrorists. See William Lee Eubank and

38 Berry, ‘Theories’ (note 33) pp.298–300.


40 Berry, ‘Theories’ (note 33) pp.299–300.

Reforms carried out during an insurgency raise the question of what is known as relative success. Robert Taber, for example, believes that any government concessions which try to accommodate the insurgents can be regarded as surrender because the government is an agent and protector of the status quo and anything which forces an alteration is a defeat. On the other hand, it could be argued that the very essence of counter-insurgency is not to prevent change but to manage it to one’s own advantage. See Robert Taber, *War of the Flea* (London: Paladin 1970) p.24.


45 See, for example, the hijacking of TWA flight 847 by Lebanese Shiite terrorists in 1985: Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (note 14) pp.132–5.


50 For example, there are numerous operational and tactical weaknesses resulting from the fact that all terrorist organizations begin as small conspiratorial groups, making them vulnerable to institutional dynamics, deficiencies in command and control, lack of logistical support, etc. Many of these problems are addressed in the writings of Abraham Guillen, who was close to the Uruguayan *Tupamaros*. See Abraham Guillen, *Philosophy of the Urban Guerrilla: The Revolutionary Writings of Abraham Guillen* (New York: William Morrow 1973). For a more contemporary, academic assessment of group dynamics within terrorist groups, see Jerrold M. Post, ‘Terrorist Psycho-logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces’ in Walter Reich, *Origins of Terrorism* (note 5) pp.25–40.


53 Knauss and Strickland, ‘Political Disintegration’ (note 5) pp.87–8.
59 Clausewitz, On War (note 9) p.99.
60 Ibid.