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6. Constructing Terrorism

From Fear and Coercion to Anger and Jujitsu Politics

Clark McCauley

In this chapter I begin by reviewing common definitions of terrorism to show the popularity of assuming that terrorists intend to coerce governments and their citizens through fear. Then I draw out some of the costs of this assumption for both analysts of terrorism and practitioners of counterterrorism. In particular I argue that the predominant reaction to terrorism is not fear but anger, and that terrorists aim to elicit anger and overreaction in order to gain support for their cause, a strategy Sophia Moskalenko and I have called *jujitsu politics*.

DEFINING TERRORISM AS INTENT TO COERCE BY FEAR

It is no secret that there has been grave difficulty in finding agreement on a definition of terrorism. It is perhaps more surprising to note the degree to which Western definitions share the idea that terrorists aim to create fear in order to coerce a government or its citizens. In other words, terrorists are those who aim to terrorize. Some salient definitions of terrorism are represented in this section to show the popularity of defining terrorism by intent; the relevant part of each definition is represented in bold.

Proposed United Nations Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism

1. Any person commits an offence within the meaning of this Convention if that person, by any means, unlawfully and intentionally, causes:
 - (a) Death or serious bodily injury to any person; or
 - (b) Serious damage to public or private property, including a place of public use, a State or government facility, a public transportation system, an infrastructure facility or the environment; or

- (c) Damage to property, places, facilities, or systems referred to in paragraph 1 (b) of this article, resulting or likely to result in major economic loss, **when the purpose of the conduct, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act.**¹

Because of disagreement about whether this definition would apply to government forces and government leaders, this definition has been under discussion at the United Nations since 2002.²

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's Terrorism Act 2000 defined terrorism as follows:

- (1) In this Act "terrorism" means the use or threat of action where:
 - (a) the action falls within subsection (2),
 - (b) **the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public** and
 - (c) the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.
- (2) Action falls within this subsection if it:
 - (a) involves serious violence against a person,
 - (b) involves serious damage to property,
 - (c) endangers a person's life, other than that of the person committing the action,
 - (d) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public or
 - (e) is designed seriously to interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system."³

US Definitions

Title 22 of the US Code of Federal Regulations, Section 2656f(d), defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience."⁴ The US State Department uses this definition for its yearly reports on terrorist activity, and the CIA likewise uses this definition.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines terrorism as "**the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to**

intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”⁵

The US Department of Defense defines terrorism as “**the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies**. Terrorism is often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs and committed in the pursuit of goals that are usually political.”⁶

The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) also has a definition of terrorism:

the use of force or violence against persons or property in violation of the criminal laws of the United States **for purposes of intimidation, coercion, or ransom**. Terrorists often use threats to:

- Create fear among the public.
- Try to convince citizens that their government is powerless to prevent terrorism.
- Get immediate publicity for their causes.⁷

The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 defines domestic terrorism as “activities that (A) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any state; (B) **appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion;** or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and (C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S.”⁸

The Department of Homeland Security, in the law creating DHS, defines terrorism as “any activity that—(A) involves an act that—(i) is dangerous to human life or potentially destructive of critical infrastructure or key resources; and (ii) is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State or other subdivision of the United States; and (B) **appears to be intended—(i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.**”⁹

Of these eight definitions of terrorism, seven include terrorist motivation to intimidate, coerce, or compel. Two of the US definitions, from the US Department of Defense and the US Federal Emergency Management Agency, refer explicitly to coercion by fear. Only one definition, in the US

Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), does not refer to intimidation and coercion: “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”

The US CFR definition is notably close to Martha Crenshaw’s 1995 definition: “Terrorism is a conspiratorial style of violence calculated to alter the attitudes and behavior of multitude audiences. It targets the few in a way that claims the attention of the many. Terrorism is not mass or collective violence but rather the direct activity of small groups.”¹⁰

WHAT DO TERRORISTS WANT?

Terror as a tactic of political conflict and political control goes far back in history, notably in the actions of states seeking to control citizens or subjects. Thus the Romans lined roads with crosses bringing agonizing death to “bandits” who today might be called terrorists. Naming this tactic *terrorism* goes back only to the French Revolution, in which the new government embraced killing of aristocrats, clerics, and even peasants loyal to the old regime. “Kill one man, frighten a thousand” may be the shortest description of terror as a political tactic.

As states through history have used terror to coerce, compel, and intimidate, states facing nonstate violence find it an obvious assumption that coercion based on fear is what the terrorist threat is about. This easy projection of state motives to terrorist motives must be resisted, however, because it has several unhelpful consequences.

The first consequence is to make terrorist motivations difficult to analyze. When one among many possible motives for a terrorist attack is included in the definition of terrorism, all other possibilities tend to vanish. For this reason, no social scientist would put a hypothetical explanation of a phenomenon in the definition of the phenomenon of interest.

For instance, if we were interested in why people give to charity, it would not be helpful to define giving to charity as a behavior based on intent to help others. Such a definition would make other possible intentions disappear. What if some people give to charity to gain the admiration of others or to avoid being seen as stingy and selfish? Similarly, terrorists may have many motives other than coercion, including such individualist motives as revenge, thrill-seeking, and status. It is perhaps an indicator of the status of social science in government offices that so many government definitions of terrorism enshrine one possible motive for terrorism in the very definition of terrorism.

A *second consequence* of identifying terrorism with coercion is that the competition between terrorist groups becomes invisible. When groups advancing the same political cause are in competition for the same base of sympathizers and supporters, these groups are likely to escalate gradually to more extreme tactics. Mia Bloom has called this kind of competition *outbidding*. If one group begins using suicide bombers, for instance, competing groups are likely to follow.

Outbidding violence can often be identified in the locations and timing of attacks. This is the case for attacks in Paris attributed to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. On January 7, 2015, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi killed eleven people in the Paris offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. They credited their training and support to al-Qaeda in Yemen. At almost the same time, between January 7 and 9, 2015, Amedy Coulibaly killed a policeman and four people in a Jewish kosher grocery store in Paris. He credited the Islamic State for his inspiration.¹¹ The rivalry between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State has been seen also in attacks in Yemen and Mali.¹²

Violence motivated by competition among militant groups is invisible when our view of terrorism begins and ends in coercion of those attacked. For outbidding violence, the intended audience is not the government or citizens attacked, but those who already sympathize with the terrorist cause.

A *third consequence* of identifying terrorism with coercion is that fear becomes the key emotion for understanding and resisting terrorism. Terrorists want to terrorize! If the target of terrorist attacks, both the government and its citizens, can resist fear and intimidation, the terrorists cannot succeed. And how better to demonstrate the conquest of fear than to strike back against the terrorists, to mobilize new resources to fight terrorism, to strengthen government power to fight terrorism—in short, to declare war on terrorism. Unfortunately for this simple view, terrorists count on anger and outrage at least as much as they count on fear, as will be discussed in the following section.

A *fourth consequence* of including fear and coercion in government definitions is that citizens are misled about the danger that terrorism poses. This is a mass psychology problem, not a problem for specialists and analysts. Many who study terrorism, inside government as well as outside, understand that fear and coercion are not the only goals of terrorist attacks. But the citizens who read and hear government definitions of terrorism, especially as these are embodied in the opinions of politicians and pundits, believe that, if they do not give in to fear and if they support war against terrorists, they have done their best. The next section shows the costs of this misplaced confidence.

BEYOND COERCION: JUJITSU POLITICS

Decades of research with small face-to-face groups have shown that outgroup threat leads to increased group cohesion, increased respect for ingroup leaders, increased sanctions for ingroup deviates, and idealization of ingroup norms. In larger groups, reference to cohesion is often replaced with references to ingroup identification, patriotism, or nationalism, but the pattern in response to outgroup threat is similar to that seen in small groups.

Consider the changes brought to US politics after the terrorist attacks of September 2001: increased patriotism visible in rallies, flags, banners, and bumper stickers; polls showing increased support for the president and for every agent and agency of government; increased sanctions for Americans challenging the consensus (Bill Maher sacked for suggesting the 9/11 attackers were not cowards); and reification of American values (“They hate us for our values”).

Consider also the emotions associated with the 9/11 attacks. An innovative study by Back, Kufner, and Egloff examined emotion words in millions of words of texts sent in the United States on September 11, 2001.¹³ Anger-related words increased throughout the day, their incidence ending six times higher than that of fear- and sadness-related words.

Anger and fear have different action tendencies. Experiments described by Wetherell and colleagues show that individuals responding with anger to images of the 9/11 attacks are more likely to favor aggressive reactions to terrorism, whereas reactions of fear and sadness are related to support for more defensive reactions.¹⁴ Across several studies Wetherell et al. found that anger reactions are related to support for attacking terrorist leaders in foreign countries, support for war against countries harboring terrorists, and outgroup derogation of Arab Americans and Palestinians. In other studies fear reactions were associated with increased support for government surveillance and restriction of civil liberties.

In short, the predominant US reaction to the 9/11 attacks was not fear, but anger. Anger is associated with aggression and outgroup derogation; fear is associated with defensive strategies of surveillance and curtailed civil rights. Anger is the emotion sought by terrorists aiming to elicit overreaction to their attacks—using the enemy’s strength against him in a strategy of *jujitsu politics*.¹⁵ The power of this strategy, and the importance of anger reactions in making the strategy successful, is hidden by definitions of terrorism that focus only on fear and coercion.

Al-Qaeda had good reason to be hopeful that jujitsu politics would work for them on 9/11.

In 1986, the United States attempted to reply to Libyan-supported terrorism by bombing Libya's leader, Muammar al-Qaddafi. The bombs missed Qaddafi but a bomb or two did hit an apartment building and killed a number of civilians. This mistake was downplayed in the United States, but it was a public-relations success for anti-US groups across North Africa.

In 1998 the United States attempted to reply to al-Qaeda attacks on US embassies in Africa by sending cruise missiles against a weapons factory in Sudan and against al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. It turned out that the weapons factory was making medical supplies—more fuel for anti-US feelings. Worse yet, the cruise missiles landing in Afghanistan blew off the table a deal in which Afghanistan's Taliban would turn over Osama bin Laden and other of his troublesome Arab colleagues to Saudi Arabia—where the Saudi royals were still smarting from bin Laden's criticism.

Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri enunciated the strategy of jujitsu politics in his memoir *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*.

The masters in Washington and Tel Aviv are using the apostate Muslim regimes to protect their interests and to fight the battle against the Muslims on their behalf. If the shrapnel from the battle reach their homes and bodies, they will trade accusations with their agents about who is responsible for this. In that case, they will face one of two bitter choices: either personally wage the battle against the Muslims, which means that the battle will turn into clear-cut jihad against infidels, or they reconsider their plans after acknowledging the failure of the brute and violent confrontation against Muslims.¹⁶

Al-Zawahiri argues that if the shrapnel of war reaches American homes, Americans must either give up their control of Muslim countries or come out from behind their Muslim stooges to fight for control. But if American troops move into Muslim countries, these troops would become a magnet for jihad of the kind the Russians faced in Afghanistan. Although the US war against the Taliban was faster and cleaner of collateral damage to civilians than al-Qaeda had expected, the US move into Iraq did indeed bring out more terrorists, both in Muslim and in Western countries.

More recently, jujitsu politics is part of the motivation behind the ISIS-sponsored attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, which killed 130 and wounded 367, as well as the Brussels attacks on March 22, 2016, which killed 32 and injured more than 300. These attacks left a big question: Why would a group aiming for a Sunni state in Syria and Iraq, a group already under attack by the government forces of Syria, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Russia, mount a terrorist attack in Paris or Brussels?

Every terrorist attack and every counterterrorist response is a communication to multiple audiences. We need to look at these audiences separately to see the logic of the Paris attacks.

For Sunni Muslims chafing under Shi'a power in Iraq and Syria, the message is power. ISIS can best defend Sunnis because ISIS has the power. For young Sunni men in the Middle East, the message is "Don't think about joining 'moderate' Sunni rebels; don't think about joining a local tribal militia; join the winning team—join ISIS."

For Muslims in Europe there is also a message of power, but more important, there is jujitsu politics—ISIS trying to use Western strength against the West. A response to terrorism that creates collateral damage, that harms individuals previously unsympathetic to the terrorists, can bring new status and new volunteers for the terrorists.

This is the result ISIS sought from the Paris and Brussels attacks. In France and in other European countries, ISIS aimed for a government response that would target Muslims with new restrictions and new surveillance. ISIS hoped also for a public reaction against Muslims and the strengthening of anti-immigrant political parties, not only in France but in other European countries as well. They wanted increased discrimination and hostility aimed at European Muslims.

In short, ISIS looked and is still looking for European reactions to push European Muslims toward joining in the construction of a new caliphate. There are more than 20 million Muslims living in the European Union. So far perhaps 2,000 have traveled to Syria to join ISIS. Jujitsu politics can bring more volunteers, more home-grown terrorists, and more security costs for European countries.

Will it work? Political speeches and newspapers are full of war talk. French forces have joined with US forces in dropping more bombs on the areas of Syria and Iraq controlled by the Islamic State. As Islamic State fighters try to blend in with civilians, the escalation of bombing means escalation of collateral damage.

In France new powers of investigation and detention have been advanced for use by police and security forces. These will be felt more in Muslim immigrant neighborhoods than elsewhere. The French parliament in May 2016 approved another two-month extension of the state of emergency that curtails civil liberties. "The state of emergency," the *New York Times* reported, "had enabled the authorities to put people under house arrest and to carry out police raids without the prior authorization of a judge. Sixty-nine people are currently under house arrest . . . and more than 3,500 raids have been carried out since Nov. 14."¹⁷

Perhaps the most dangerous force for hostility and discrimination is the definition of the enemy as “fundamentalist Muslims.” Marine Le Pen, leader of an anti-immigrant party in France, offered this target in an interview with NPR’s Robert Siegel: “And we must eradicate Islamic fundamentalism from our soil.”¹⁸ Siegel did not challenge Le Pen’s definition of the problem. But the fact is that the great majority of Islamic fundamentalists are devout, rather than political. Defining religious ideas and religious practice as the enemy will attack ninety-nine peaceful Muslims for every jihadist reached. Jujitsu politics will be winning.

Even better for ISIS than training and supporting people to attack in Western countries is inspiring homegrown attackers to claim allegiance to ISIS. Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik began preparing for their December 2015 attack in San Bernardino before ISIS hit the news in summer 2014, but their last-minute invocation of “Islamic State” was enough to raise the brand name in American eyes. Similarly, Omar Mateen claimed allegiance to the Islamic State in a 911 call made during his June 2016 attacks in Orlando; most news media accounted him an Islamic terrorist despite his history of mental health problems and despite his having chosen a target—Latino gays—that undermined the political significance of his attack.¹⁹

Despite the fuzzy motivations of the attackers, these two attacks have been credited to Muslim extremism in general and to the Islamic State in particular. We need to ask why it is so easy to turn the actions of a few individuals into calls for excluding Muslims from the United States, profiling Muslims already living in the United States, and increasing public hostility toward Muslims.²⁰ When and why is it easy to project onto the many the actions of a few? Research in this direction is urgently needed, but it is already clear that an important part of the power of jujitsu politics is our easy projection from the actions of a few terrorists to suspicion of the whole group the terrorists claim they represent.

COUNTERTERRORISM: A DYNAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Jujitsu politics points to the importance of action and reaction in the conflict between terrorists and their targets. Overreaction to a terrorist attack produces its own reaction in escalated sympathy and support for the terrorists. In turn, terrorists escalate their attacks or broaden their targets. Action and reaction produce a trajectory of escalating violence over time.

To understand terrorism is to understand this trajectory. It is not possible to understand or anticipate terrorist actions without understanding how

terrorists see and respond to government actions. Studying the terrorists “out there” is a mirage: they do not exist out there; they exist in a dynamic relation with us, their targets. This is a difficult perspective for officials and officers charged with fighting terrorism to take. To get into the mind of a terrorist can make it more difficult to shoot one. To get into the mind of a terrorist can raise doubts about what we, the terrorists’ targets, may have done to instigate terrorist attack.

Returning now to the popularity of definitions of terrorism that assume that terrorists aim to terrorize, it becomes clear how these definitions can blind analysts, officials, and citizens alike to the danger of overreaction. If terrorists want to coerce us with fear, then we will be safe so long as we are not intimidated and fight back. But if we do not see the power in the dynamics of interaction, we cede this power to the terrorists, who are pleased that we do not understand their best weapon.

Why are we so easily blinded? Defining terrorism as an attempt to coerce with fear is part of the answer, but the definition itself requires explanation. What is the attraction of a definition that appears ignorant or bizarre to any social scientist? It is possible that our blindness arises from some cognitive deficit associated with asymmetric conflict or from some form of cognitive bias in attributions about intergroup violence. But, as already suggested in relation to getting into the mind of the terrorist, there is a simpler possibility.

Perhaps ours is a motivated blindness. Not seeing terrorism as interaction saves our self-image as blameless victims and eases our way to violence as retribution for terrorist violence. Our retribution can include not just boots on the ground but assassination from the air and torture in a prison. Seeing conflict as an interaction humanizes the enemy; heroic resistance to fear and coercion makes the enemy into monsters.

Here it is useful to note the strong parallel between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. The *US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* pays close attention to the insurgent strategy that aims to mobilize new support by eliciting government overreaction to insurgent attacks.²¹ The need to counter this strategy of jujitsu politics comes through in the first five “Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency Operations”:

1. Sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be.
2. Sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is.
3. The more successful the counterinsurgency is, the less force can be used and the more risk must be accepted.

4. Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction.
5. Some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot.²²

Insurgency and terrorism are forms of political conflict. Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism are thus also forms of political conflict. Mao Zedong's slogan is perhaps the shortest summary of the road to success for both counterinsurgency and counterterrorism: *Politics takes command!* For analysts of terrorism and practitioners of counterterrorism, a more political and interactive perspective requires going beyond definitions of terrorism that focus only on fear and coercion. For citizens of a democratic state, increased resistance to jujitsu politics similarly requires getting beyond the idea that we have nothing to fear but fear.

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