

Is Terrorism Successful?

Terrorism is a deliberate strategy



Terrorism has been explored over and over again from a psychological perspective. But, as much as psychological traits and characteristics may influence the motivations and behavior of a terrorist, in essence, terrorism remains a functional endeavor. Remember that terrorism is widely defined as the use of violence or threat of violence to purport a political, religious, or ideological change.

Therefore, it can be seen more like an organized and deliberate strategy to achieve a goal than a reactive delusional or illogical action, at least from the leadership structures. Exceptions that seem to become more prevalent in recent years are lone wolf terrorism, where the perpetrators are not under the instruction of any organized group, or untethered to organizations which beliefs they are trying to impress onto society.

Is terrorism successful?

Terrorism, in the traditional sense, has been around for millennia and has grown in reach, frequency, and severity since. If terrorism is not a successful strategy, would such strategy have persisted? The idea is widespread that terrorism is successful, but does evidence support such an assumption? Before examining this, it is important to reiterate the distinctions between terrorism and other modes of violence and conflict again. According to U.K. counterterrorism advisor Paul Wilkinson, the following attributes define terrorism:

- It is premeditated and designed to create a climate of fear.
- It is directed at a wider audience than the immediate victims.
- It inherently involves attacks on random or symbolic targets, including civilians.
- It is considered by the society in which it occurs as violating the norms regulating disputes, protests, and dissent.
- It is used primarily to influence the political behavior of governments, communities, or particular social groups.

Terrorism is relatively uncomplicated and inexpensive

In this context, terrorism is an attractive tactic to achieve political goals as it is fairly economical and usually not very difficult to accomplish. Thanks to the reach of social media and mainstream media's tendency to propagandize and portray a one-sided agenda, relatively small groups with limited resources can appear much more powerful and appeal to large audiences of potential followers.

U.S. National Public Radio (NPR) recently estimated that an attack similar to the London transportation bombings in 2005 would cost a total of about \$14,000. That particular attack was self-financed. A remote-controlled improvised explosive device costs about \$400, a suicide vest as little as \$1,200, and a car bomb between \$13,000 and \$20,000 depending on the expense of the car used. This is small change compared to the Islamic State's estimated cash funds of \$2 billion.

Success means achieving stated goals

However, despite the fact that terrorism makes headlines and are high on national agendas, the attention and creation of fear do not necessarily equate to success. Instead, the actual achievement of measurable political goals is a better yardstick. Therefore, terrorist groups can be viewed as a success if they are perceived to be a sufficiently powerful actor that compel governments to pay attention to their demands, and are able to survive and maintain continuity. Ultimately, success is defined as achieving their stated political goals in the context of creating high levels of fear and attention to attain this.

We look at the degree of success of terrorist organizations regarding achieved political goals first, which is linked to the rational or instrumental approach to studying terrorism. Such an approach proposes that terrorists are rational actors that apply some kind of a cost-benefit analysis to determine the tactics and strategy that would give them at least a small chance to achieve some of their political goals.

Success depends on target selection

Max Abrahms analyzed 28 groups that are on the designated list of terrorist organizations of the United States and came to two main conclusions. First, groups accomplish their policy objectives only about 7% of the time. Second, the level of success depends on tactical choices, especially target selection. Those groups whose attacks on civilian targets outnumber the attacks on military targets systematically fail to achieve their policy objectives. These findings suggest that terrorist groups rarely reach their goals and that the poor success rate is inherent to the tactic of terrorism itself. In simpler terms: groups are more likely to fail if they target civilians. In itself, this conclusion challenges the dominant theory that terrorism is rational behavior.

Three-quarters of terrorist groups don't last a year

Although terrorists have appeared to increase their professionalism, escalate violence and casualties, develop new methods of financing, exploit new communication strategies, and created new organizational models, their success rate (in achieving objectives) has not improved. Neither does it appear that their lifespans have increased. Of the approximately 2,000 different terrorist organizations in the Global Terrorist Database (GTD), nearly 75% did not last one year (measured from their first to last known attack). Of course, there are notable exceptions such as ETA (attacks 1959 – 2007), the Taliban (from 1994), and Al Qaeda (from 1992). Furthermore, in the past 50 years, only a few designated terrorist groups achieved some of their goals (e.g. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the African National Congress, all of whom transitioned from terrorist group to political party).

However, the lion's share of groups did not last long, or achieve their objectives, arguably due to a lack of resources, clear vision, or tactics that did not attract support. Nevertheless, the low cost, straightforward operations, access to disenfranchised recruits, and sensational media coverage continue to make terrorism a useful option to create division and disrupt government decision-making.