

## **Lecture 5 – Is Terrorism Effective?**

Hi class, and welcome to our lecture on whether terrorism is an effective approach for non-state militant groups that seek to coerce governments into making tangible political changes.

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#### **Essential Background**

Alright, now, this lecture is going to be based on a study undertaken by Max Abrahms, who is one of the most prolific scholars in the debate over the effectiveness of terrorism. He sought to analyze whether nonstate militant groups are likely to be more successful if they pursue *guerrilla warfare* or *terrorism* to try to achieve their strategic objectives, which, as you'll no-doubt recall from one of our earlier lectures, are the goals that a militant group is trying to accomplish. These tend to be some sort of tangible change to the political status quo, like convincing a government to give up control over a piece of territory or change some of its foreign or domestic policies.

He agrees with the elements of the definition of terrorism that we discussed earlier in this module, which defined terrorism as “the use of random violence by nonstate actors against noncombatants for political purposes.”

The most important element of this definition for this lecture is the word “noncombatants,” which Abrahms equates with “civilians” or anyone who is not a member of a government security force or a government itself, such as a politician.

Therefore, he thinks that violence by nonstate militant groups that targets civilians should be considered terrorism whereas violence by militant groups that targets members of a government security force or a government itself should be considered *guerilla warfare*. These are important terms to remember because I will use them quite often in this lecture.

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Now, to try to determine whether militant groups are likely to be more successful if they pursue guerrilla warfare or terrorism to try to achieve their strategic objectives, Abrahms analyzed 124 violent campaigns waged by 54 militant groups. He defined a “campaign” as multiple attacks that killed at least one person from the target country for the stated purpose of exacting a political concession from the target country’s government.

As could be expected, the number of campaigns is much larger than the number of militant groups because many of these groups have waged more than one campaign. For example, a group called Ansar al-Islam has waged two campaigns – one against the Government of Iraq to try to convince it to establish Sharia law in Iraq and one against the United States to try to convince it to remove its armed forces from Iraq.

Abrahms defined “guerrilla warfare” campaigns as ones where the group focused their attacks on the country’s security forces. And he defined “terror” campaigns as ones where the group focused their attacks on civilians. And, since some campaigns mounted by militant groups have targeted and killed both civilians and members of security forces, he determined how to classify each campaign on the basis of which kind of person the group targeted most of the time.

So, for example, al-Qaeda’s campaign to oust the United States military from Iraq is designated a “guerrilla” campaign because most of the Americans targeted were military personnel. On the other hand, al-Qaeda’s campaign that culminated in multiple attacks on September 11th, 2001, is designated a “terror” campaign because most of the Americans targeted were civilians.

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#### **Are Terror Campaigns Strategically Effective?**

Alright, now the first critical point that needs to be made is that militant groups sometimes DO achieve their strategic objectives. In Abrahms’

study of 124 campaigns organized by militant groups, he found that 37 campaigns, or about 30 percent, successfully coerced the target country's government into at least *partially* complying with at least one of the group's demands. This is a generous and low bar for gauging whether these groups were successful, since, again, they were deemed to be successful if they even *partially* accomplished *any* of their strategic objectives.

However, the *second* critical point that needs to be made is that *there is a clear difference* in the success rate of militant groups that pursued *guerilla* campaigns that targeted security forces and *terror* campaigns that targeted non-combatants. Conveniently, the number of guerilla and terror campaigns in the dataset he used was nearly identical, at 60 and 64 respectively, but 36 out of the 37 *successful* campaigns were *guerilla* campaigns that targeted security personnel.

As I've mentioned already in this module, Hezbollah's suicidal double truck bomb attack on the US Marine Corps and French Army barracks in Beirut in October of 1983, which killed 220 US Marines, 18 members of the US Navy, and 3 members of the US Army as well as 58 French soldiers and six civilians, is widely considered the most successful pair of attacks in one of the most strategically successful campaigns ever waged by a militant group in the sense that the group achieved *exactly* what it wanted, which was to convince the American and French governments to quickly remove their military personnel from Lebanon.

In his memoirs, President Ronald Reagan admitted that, in his words, "The price we had to pay in Beirut was so great, the tragedy at the barracks was so enormous.... We had to pull out.... We couldn't stay there and run the risk of another suicide attack."

Of critical importance, even though these attacks are often described as acts of *terrorism*, they were directed against *military personnel within military facilities* and, according to Abrahms, they should, therefore, be considered acts of *guerilla warfare*.

Hezbollah achieved another strategic objective in the year 2000 when it convinced the Government of Israel to withdrawal the Israeli Defence Forces from southern Lebanon. As in 1983, the targets of its violence were *military personnel*. This was a conscious choice on the part of Hezbollah's commanders, who ordered their rank-and-file fighters to do everything possible to *avoid* injuring or killing Israeli civilians.

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On the other hand, just *one* of the *terror* campaigns *could* be considered at least *partially* successful. This was the 2004 Madrid train station bombing that involved an al-Qaeda-linked group called the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group attacking Spanish commuters days before the Spanish general election, which may have helped to elect the antiwar candidate, José Luis Rodríguez-Zapatero's, party into power. Rodríguez-Zapatero then fulfilled his pledge to bring Spain's troops home from Iraq, which is what the militant group wanted to achieve.

At best, we can consider this case an *outlier* that fails to conform to the general pattern but there are good reasons to question whether it should actually be considered a *success*. This is because Rodriguez-Zapatero had a decent chance of winning the election *regardless* of whether these attacks took place. He was in a statistical tie with his main rival in public opinion polls taken right before the attacks took place, with a lot of potential voters claiming they had not yet made up their minds. It's *possible* the attacks encouraged some undecided voters to accept his anti-war stance and vote for him, but we really can't know one way or another. And if the attacks hadn't taken place and Rodriguez-Zapatero had become prime minister anyway, it seems likely that he would have removed Spain's troops from Iraq given that he had campaigned to do this.

Another violent campaign that is *often hailed* as a successful use of terrorism is the African National Congress' campaign to try to convince the racist Apartheid government of South Africa to give up power and

allow all South Africans, regardless of their ethnicity, to run for office and participate in free and fair elections. But, while the ANC *did* occasionally attack civilians, they primarily attacked political, military, and economic targets and most of these attacks were acts of *sabotage* since they were directed against inanimate objects rather than people. Even the judge at Nelson Mandela's infamous trial in 1964 agreed that his group actively sought to avoid attacking civilians. An ANC manual captured by the South African police in 1963, likewise, illustrated how the group's rank-and-file fighters were instructed to behave largely as saboteurs and guerillas, since it told them to attack strategic roads, railways and other communications; power stations; police stations, camps and military forces; [and] irredeemable Government stooges.

And when the ANC *did* target civilians, such as the bombing of the Magoo bar on Durban beach in June of 1986 that killed three civilians and the bombing of the Wimpy bar outside Johannesburg in July of 1988 that killed five civilians, this *slowed down* the progress that the ANC was making toward ending Apartheid rather than assist the group's efforts. Reflecting on the times the ANC used terrorism, Mandela wrote in his autobiography that "Terrorism *inevitably reflected poorly* on those who used it, undermining any public support it might otherwise garner." Other ANC leaders agreed that attacks on civilians "had a devastating political effect" that "consolidated white opinion" and "strengthened the hand of the white government," as "the enemy took what we were doing and tried to use it against us." Therefore, Abrahms concludes that, if anything, the ANC eventually achieved its strategic objective *despite* its occasional use of terrorist attacks rather than *because* of them.

Overall, Abrahms' findings strongly suggest that *target selection* has a significant influence on the success rate of militant groups and is, by far, the most important factor in determining whether a militant group will be able to even partially achieve any of its strategic objectives. When militant groups rely on a *guerrilla* campaign, it *often succeeds* in achieving their stated political goals. But when these militant groups rely

on a *terror* campaign, it *nearly always fails*. Terrorism is, therefore, an ineffective strategy.

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### **Possible Alternative Explanations**

#### ***Militant Group Strength***

Now, when presented with results like this, it is natural and reasonable to ask whether *other factors* could have affected them and/or provide a plausible alternative explanation for why the results turned out the way they did. Lucky for us, Abrahms anticipated this and examined the potential role played by a range of other factors.

First off, he examined the *militant groups' strength* to see whether the successful groups tended to be *relatively strong* and whether the groups that failed tended to be *relatively weak*. Relatively weak groups may feel they *need* to pursue terror campaigns against civilian targets that can't fight back because they are *too weak* to pursue *guerilla warfare* against soldiers or well-guarded politicians who can defend themselves and fight back. And we should *not expect* relatively weak groups to achieve their strategic objectives as often as relatively strong groups do.

Abrahms determined a militant group's relative capabilities on the basis of the group's *membership size*, with relatively *large* groups with lots of fighters being considered stronger than relatively small groups.

After conducting his analysis, Abrahms found that a militant group's strength had no apparent influence on the probability that it will achieve its strategic objectives, which means that relatively strong groups were no more likely to achieve their objectives than relatively weak groups were. The success rate of relatively strong groups was 29 percent while that of relatively weak groups was 30 percent. And while one relatively weak group arguably succeeded in a single terror campaign – that being the 2004 Madrid train bombings – much stronger groups that used terror campaigns failed. Al-Qaida was one of the largest militant groups ever, with close to 50,000 members at its peak size, but, despite having these

resources at its disposal, its terror campaigns failed to achieve the group's strategic objectives.

Again, the success rate among relatively strong and relatively weak militant groups that used *guerilla warfare* was very similar, which suggests that a group's strength was not a decisive factor.

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#### ***Target Country Strength***

In addition, Abrahms also examined the potential influence of the *target countries' strength*, since countries that are relatively strong should logically be *better* at dealing with the violence inflicted by a militant group and, in turn, be better at *resisting giving into* the demands made by militant groups. Another way to put this is that relatively strong countries should be *harder to coerce*.

After conducting his analysis, Abrahms found that the target country's capabilities had no influence on the probability that a militant group would achieve its strategic objectives. As a result, campaigns waged against relatively weak countries were no more likely to succeed than campaigns waged against relatively strong countries.

It's important to remember that the most successful attacks ever mounted by a militant group – those being Hezbollah's 1983 truck bomb attacks in Beirut – were inflicted against the single most powerful country in the world – that being the United States – and another great power – that being France. Their vast strength did not preclude Hezbollah from being able to coerce them through its attacks against their armed forces.

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#### ***Militant Group's Tactical Effectiveness***

Next up, Abrahms tested to see whether the *tactical effectiveness* of a militant group's campaigns influenced their ability to achieve their *strategic objectives*. In other words, he tried to figure out whether groups

that killed more people were more successful at forcing governments to make concessions to their demands. If guerilla campaigns tended to be deadlier, then this might help account for the much higher success rate that guerilla campaigns have achieved over terror campaigns.

After conducting his analysis, Abrahms found that *terror* campaigns tended to kill more people than guerilla campaigns, likely because the nature of the people they target – those being non-combatants – makes them inherently easier to kill than trained and well-armed soldiers and police are.

But, despite being generally deadlier, terror campaigns almost never succeed.

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#### ***Shifting Approaches?***

Finally, in what was perhaps the most important extra test of all, Abrahms examined the level of strategic success achieved by militant groups that used *both* guerilla and terror campaigns to try to achieve their objectives.

He found that *these* militant groups achieved a *noticeably lower* success rate when they pursued their terror campaigns than their guerilla campaigns because they collectively achieved at least partial success in 31 of their 46 guerrilla campaigns, but never succeeded in any of their ten terror campaigns. In other words, when an militant group wages a guerrilla campaign, it is frequently successful in coercing at least partial compliance with its demands. But when that *same* group wages a terror campaign, it will almost certainly fail to get what it wants.

So, for example, I mentioned earlier that Hezbollah achieved two major strategic objectives through its guerilla warfare campaigns against the American, French, and Israeli militaries in 1983 and the year 2000. But this very same group has, at other times, pursued terror campaigns such as in July 1994 when it blew up the Jewish Community Centre in

Buenos Aires and killed 85 civilians and in July 2006 when it killed 43 Israeli civilians by firing thousands of Katyusha rockets into northern Israel. When it used terrorism, this group failed to achieve its strategic objectives because it failed to convince Israel to concede to its demands.

If we turn our attention to another militant group, the Islamic State is widely considered an incredibly successful terrorist group, and with good reason given that it did, indeed, pursue campaigns of terror *after* taking over about a third of Iraq's territory and a third of Syria's territory in 2014 – an area about the size of the UK with about nine million people living in it. However, the group actually *conquered* its caliphate using a guerilla warfare campaign that saw its fighters direct their attacks primarily at members of state-based and non-state security forces, including not just the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces and police but also rival militant groups.

Most of the state-based soldiers ran away rather than try to fight the Islamic State and the non-state groups it fought were much smaller and weaker than it. Moreover, a heck of a lot of the territory that the group took over was very sparsely populated and had very few enemy combatants present to even *try* to fight back against it. The Islamic State was also initially welcomed by many civilians living in the areas it conquered because they had been living for years in highly unstable environments overrun by numerous warring factions and appreciated the chance that this group might provide more stability for them.

But right after the Islamic State established its new caliphate and switched to launching *terrorist* attacks against civilians living inside the territory it controlled, it quickly lost the support of the civilians that had welcomed its initial conquest as well as most of its foreign supporters.

This, in turn, meant that its revenue streams largely dried up to the point where it could not pay its fighters and it could not replace those that died or defected with an equal number of new recruits since it found it harder and harder to find people willing to join the group.

Its terrorist attacks in other countries, particularly in the West, also encouraged their governments to increase their efforts to help defeat the group in Iraq and Syria. During 2015 the group lost 40 percent of its territory in Iraq and 20 percent of its territory in Syria. During 2016, it lost another 25 percent of its total territory and had lost over two-thirds of its total territory by the end of 2017 and was basically no longer a significant threat either locally or internationally.

The key point made by this case is that the Islamic State achieved remarkable success through guerilla warfare and utter failure when it relied on terrorism.

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#### **Why Terrorism is a Generally Ineffective Strategy**

So, how does Abrahms explain the general *lack of success* of militant groups that use terrorism? Well, he argues that terrorist groups usually fail because, in effect, terrorist attacks make the target country's government and civilian population *THINK* that their entire value system, society, and "way of life" are under threat of being destroyed by the terrorist group, *regardless* of whether that is the group's *actual* strategic objective.

To put this point in a different way, the reason why terrorism rarely works is that the governments and societies that are *targeted* by terrorist groups conflate the short-term tactical *consequences* of a terrorist-attack, like the deaths of people they perceive to be innocent, mass fear, loss of confidence in the government or the economy, new draconian laws, and the erosion of civil liberties, with the terrorists' *strategic objectives*, which makes the target country *THINK* that the terrorist group that has attacked them wants to completely *destroy* their society.

And, since countries should rationally be very *reluctant* to give into terrorist groups that are threatening to destroy their society, they are

probably NOT going to be willing to make ANY concessions to the group that is targeting them.

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#### ***Case Study One: Russia's Response to the 1999 Apartment Bombings***

Abrams supports this argument with a couple of in-depth case studies of major terrorist attacks and how countries responded to them. The first case he looked at is Russia's response to the bombings of three apartment buildings in September of 1999 – supposedly by Chechen terrorists – that killed 229 Russian civilians.

Now, before these bombings occurred, there was widespread agreement in Russian society that Chechen militants were simply trying to establish an independent Chechen state, and most Russians supported letting them have it. For example, during the First Chechen War, which lasted from 1994 to 1996, 70 percent of Russia's citizens wanted their government to allow Chechnya to become its own independent country.

After these attacks, however, the mood in Russian society changed almost instantly into a new consensus behind the notion that the Chechen's who were blamed for the attacks wanted to destroy Russia, rather than simply free their own homeland. For example, public opinion polls indicated that, following these attacks, only 15 percent of Russians believed the Chechens were merely fighting for their independence, and the vast majority of Russians believed that the actual strategic objectives of the Chechen group that perpetrated these attacks were things like to "kill Russians," "bring Russia to its knees," "destabilize the situation in Russia," "destroy and frighten Russian society," and "bring chaos to Russian society."

Vladimir Putin, Russia's prime minister at the time, likewise, argued that the perpetrators of these attacks wanted to see Russia "go up in flames."

And, as Abrahms expected, almost three quarters of Russia's civilian population supported a new war against Chechnya while only 19 percent

of Russians favoured conducting peaceful negotiations with the Chechens.

In other words, these terrorist attacks made the vast majority of Russians unwilling to make the compromises that were necessary to allow the Chechen militants to accomplish their policy objectives because they wrongly thought that the Chechens' main strategic objective was to destroy Russia, which is not something that the Russian people or government were willing to facilitate in any way.

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#### ***Case Study Two: America's Response to the September 11th Attacks***

Alright, now, Abrahms' other major case study is well-known to all of you: America's response to the September 11th attacks, which were organized by Al-Qaida.

Although Al-Qaida's leader at the time of the attacks, Osama bin Laden, made occasional references to his disdain for the "spiritless materialist life" that he believed most Americans live and declared that "freedom and human rights in America are doomed," undermining American society was certainly NOT one of Al-Qaida's strategic objectives.

Rather, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, Al-Qaida's strategic objectives include "expelling the United States from the Persian Gulf;" "severing US-Israeli relations;" "severing US-apostate relations;" and "sparing Muslims from 'Crusader wars'."

As with the Chechen terrorist attacks in 1999, the months following the September 11th attacks saw the American government largely ignore Al-Qaida's strategic objectives and, instead, characterize the attacks as an attack on American society itself. For example, President Bush said that the attacks demonstrated that Al-Qaida "hates not our policies, but our existence," and concluded that "These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos," and designed to curtail, "our

freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

In other words, the dominant narrative in the United States, which was repeated over and over again on just about every form of mass media, was that Al-Qaida was trying to destroy the American people and their way of life.

Likely as a result of this, the American people largely reflected the views of their government. For example, despite the fact that Al-Qaida’s strategic objectives demanded changes to various aspects of US *foreign policy* that they disagreed with, between *eighty and eighty-five percent* of Americans who were polled during the first few months following the September 11th attacks felt that US foreign policy had *nothing whatsoever* to do with the attacks. Instead, the vast majority of Americans who were polled felt that Al-Qaida wanted to *destroy* American “democracy,” “freedom,” and “values,” and the American “way of life.”

So, as with the attacks in Russia in 1999, the American government and people were unwilling to even *consider* reaching a peaceful compromise with Al-Qaida because they felt that Al-Qaida’s main strategic objective was to destroy American society, which is not something they were willing to compromise on. Instead, the American government, with the support of the vast majority of the American people, decided to launch the global war on terror to kill or capture as many members of Al-Qaida and their supporters and allies as possible.

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#### **The Implications of these Findings**

So, what are the possible implications of these findings, which suggest that terrorism almost never works?

Well, first off, the leaders of militant groups that want to use violence to try to achieve their strategic objectives should *avoid using terrorism*

because harming civilians almost always encourages a counterproductive reaction from the targeted country that decreases rather than increases the group's chances of achieving their objectives.

In addition, a militant group's leaders need to actively restrain lower-level members from committing terrorism because even if the group's leaders order their rank-and-file fighters to pursue guerilla warfare, even occasional rogue attacks by their fighters against civilian targets are likely to produce counterproductive reactions that, again, will decrease the group's chance of success.

Finally, the group's leaders need to distance their group from terrorism whenever any of their fighters DO attack civilians because, if they fail to disavow these attacks, they will undermine the group's image in the eyes of the people they are trying to coerce who will, in turn, reduce their willingness to give into the group's demands.

**TAKE A FIVE MINUTE BREAK**