

# POLS 429: International Terrorism

## Lecture 14 (02.14.2020): Explaining Terrorism - The Structural Approach

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# Overview

- 1 Quick review
- 2 Assumptions
- 3 Implications
- 4 Extra Material

# Review

## WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- Assumptions: the origins of preferences; violence as a symbolic act.
- Implications: radicalization; extreme beliefs and violence (Religion versus Secular); counterproductive behavior; violence as an end.
- Policy: counter-narratives; prevent radicalization (privacy rights).
- Critiques: correlation - causation; ideology is unobserved; multiple ideologies; immoral policy implications.

Questions??

► Relevant

# The Structural Approach

## INTRODUCTION

- Most common explanation: "the root causes of terrorism".
- Terrorism → underlying structure (environment). [▶ Root Causes](#)
- Structural factors shape both the opportunity and incentives for the use of terrorism (Crenshaw 1981).
- Main objective: identify the dominant macro-level processes that generate various grievances and the opportunities to employ terrorism.

# The Structural Approach

## MAIN FEATURES

- Empirical goal: identify average patterns of the most common causes for the use of violence by terrorists. [▶ Studies](#)
- Appealing → straightforward correlations for empirical tests (clear measures).
- Ideal for generating predictions about the timing and location of terror attacks.
- Intuitive: tangible and measurable factors and conditions.

# The Structural Approach

## ASSUMPTIONS

- A rational choice by unitary actor to engage in terrorism.
- The environment: explain whether broad political, social and economic conditions make the selection of terrorism as more or less rational in one context compared to another.
- Overall, many structural factors. Requires a clear distinctions between types of factors.

# The Structural Approach

## ASSUMPTIONS (CONT.)

- Crenshaw (1981) proposition of environmental factors:
  - ① Preconditions: foundation for terrorism over the long term.
  - ② Precipitants: specific events that precede acts of terrorism.
- Opportunities → direct motivations for actors to employ terrorism.
- A Precipitant: the event/issue that "snaps" the perpetrator's patience with the situation and makes terrorism becomes possible (and moral).

# The Structural approach

## IMPLICATIONS: PRECONDITIONS

- Prevalent systematic conditions for the emergence of terrorism.
- Necessary but insufficient → the "required" foundation but are not by-themselves generate terrorism.

### (1) Regime type

- Democracies: institutions that allow citizens to express their interests in conventional channels → less terrorism.
- Autocracies: closer systems and no opportunities for political expression → more terrorism.



# The Structural Approach

## (1) Regime type (cont.)

- Data: until mid-2000's, most terror attacks occurred in democracies.
- Why? Easier 'paths' to plan and execute attacks.
- Democracies → sources for most terror attacks.
- Why? Permissive norms and laws (civil liberties, press freedom, freedom of expression, accepting diverse views).
- Under-reported terrorism data in autocracies.
- Attacks shift from established democracies to partial democracies and autocracies. [▶ RegimeTerror](#)

# The Structural Approach

## (2) State Capacity

- Weak states → no monopoly on the use of force (unable to project power versus non-state threats).
- Terrorism prevalent in civil wars, secession, and other forms of violent struggle between non-state groups and the government.
- Terrorists target weak states, why? Recruitment...
- Weak states cannot provide basic social services to the population, leaving much room for radical groups to provide those needs.

# The Structural Approach

## (2) State Capacity (Cont.)

- Example: ISIS in Iraq and Syria.
- Social breakdown (popular unrest, financial issues, elite divisions and collapse of established institutions).
- **Counter-argument** → unstable conditions make it harder for groups to operate:
  - ① Repression and policing by regime.
  - ② Clandestine operations are harder to execute.
  - ③ Targets of extortion, harassment, and compelled to "choose" a side in protracted conflict.

# The Structural Approach

## (3) Modernization

- Progressive transition: traditional → complex modern society.
- Opportunities and increased public vulnerabilities: transportation networks or enhanced communication tools.
- Market-based production → threat for particularistic, cultural identities.
- Failure to spread the benefits of progress among the population but kept it within elites.
- Increase isolation for certain societal groups.
- More terrorism in higher income countries with high level of social inequality.

# The Structural Approach

## (4) Urbanization

- Population shift from rural countryside to urban areas.
- A dense environment with multiple targets and access to various methods of attack.
- Recruitment, public support (proximity to targets).
- Financial support, anonymity.
- "Urban Guerrilla Warfare" (Latin America in 1960's).
- Attacks in urban settings → terrorism  
Attacks in rural areas → guerrilla warfare.

# The Structural Approach

## (5) Technology

- Technological progress → access to simpler and deadlier weapons, development in communication.
- The revolution in communication technology in 1990's and transnational, network-based groups: Al Qaeda.
- The power of the internet: facilitate closer links between like-minded individuals in a virtual community.
- Enhances recruitment → propaganda videos, tweets and Facebook groups.

# The Structural Approach

## (5) Technology (Cont.)

- Diverse recruits and supporters → chat-rooms and interaction platforms (Skype, Twitter, etc.).
- Recruit operatives with the knowledge and tech-savvy capabilities to engage in cyber terrorism.
- Technology as an offensive weapon → instill fear in target population.
- ISIS propaganda videos on YouTube: enhance global exposure and create more fear.

# The Structural Approach

## (5) Technology (Cont.)

- Technology and terror weapons:
  - ① The relative ease of building 'simple' weapons (IEDs).
  - ② Build weapons and IEDs using easily available tools and material.
  - ③ Instructions → accessible online.
- US attacks (2001-2015): over 70% used explosives.
- Boston: using a pressure-cooker as an explosive device.



# The Structural Approach

## (5) Technology (Cont.)

- Critics → counter-terrorism also use technology advancements.
- Improved surveillance capabilities, disruption of communication, offensive Cyber and tracking tools.
- Most CT evidence relies on intercepting satellite or cellular communications.
- Advanced CT tools → most terrorists still prefer using explosives and not technological offensive tools.

# The Structural Approach

## (6) Failed Counter-Terrorism

- CT efforts may backfire and lead to increases in terrorism.
- Military occupations failed to curb terrorism (Afghanistan and Iraq).
- The 2006 DNI (Director of National Intelligence) report on terrorism threats and the Iraq war.
- Ineffective counter-terrorism and substitution in methods.
- In most cases, policy planners ignore the potential for backlash or substitution when designing CT operations.

# Recommended readings

More studies on the structural approach to terrorism:

- 1 Boaz Atzili, "State Weakness and 'Vacuum of Power' in Lebanon," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33 (2010), pp. 757–782.
- 2 Quan Li, "Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2005), pp. 278-197.
- 3 Erica Chenoweth, "Democratic competition and Terrorist Activity", *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (2010), pp. 16-30.

# Public Policy and Civil Rights

◆ WSJ NEWS EXCLUSIVE | [POLITICS](#)

## Federal Agencies Use Cellphone Location Data for Immigration Enforcement

Commercial database that maps movements of millions of cellphones is deployed by immigration and border authorities

# "The Root causes of Terrorism"



## Addressing the root causes of terrorism

BY SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 03/19/16 10:15 AM EDT  
THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE HILL

**POLITICS**

**AMERICA VOTES 2004** SPECIAL REPORT

[Letters to the Editor](#) • [Opinion](#)

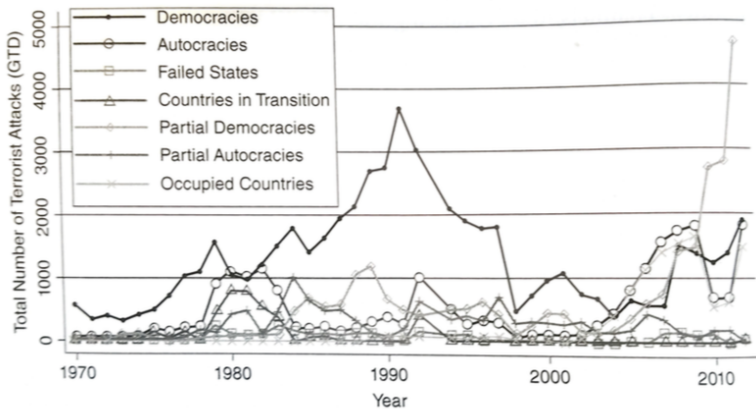
To defeat terrorism, we must address its root causes

**Gephardt: U.S. should focus on 'root causes' of terrorism**

Tuesday, January 13, 2004 Posted: 5:07 PM EST (2207 GMT)

**TABLE 6.1** A Sample of Structural Variables Associated with the Onset of Terrorism

<i>Structural Causes</i>	<i>Principal Variables</i>	<i>Relationship to Terrorism</i>	<i>Dependent Variable Measured</i>	<i>Example Sources*</i>
Democracy	Participation (voter turnout in democracies)	Negative	Transnational terrorist attacks	Li (2005)
	Political competition index (from Polity IV)	Positive	Transnational terrorist attacks	Chenoweth (2010a)
	Institutional constraints (from Polity IV)	Positive	Transnational terrorist attacks	Li (2005) Chenoweth (2010a)
	Press freedom	Positive	Transnational terrorist attacks	Li (2005)
	American dominance	Positive	Terror attacks on American interests	Braithwaite & Sobek (2005)
	Political proximity to US	Positive	Number of transnational terror events	Dreher & Gassebner (2007)
Counterterrorism/ Foreign policy	Conciliatory measures	Negative	Number of terrorist attacks (Israel)	Dugan & Chenoweth (2012)
	Drone strikes	Negative	Number of terrorist attacks (Pakistan & Afghanistan)	Johnston & Sarhahi (2016)



**Figure 6.1** Number of Annual Terrorist Attacks by Regime Type, 1970–2012

Sources: GTD & POLITY IV Dataset