



Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

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POLI 150

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Announcements

- NO CLASS Feb. 29.
- Subject pool module 1 now open until Mar. 6.
- Exam 1 on March 7.



Today's Class

- Definition of Terrorism
- Terrorism and Strategic Actors
- Types of Terrorism
- Effectiveness of Terrorism
- Counter-terrorism Strategies



Key Terms

- Terrorism (domestic and international)
- Elements of terrorism
- Terrorism tactics
- Counterterrorism tactics



Central Question

What is terrorism and why do political actors use it?



Terrorism





What is Terrorism?

Terrorism has a multi-part definition:

- Premeditated threat or use of violence
- against noncombatant targets
- by individuals or nonstate actors
- for the purpose of influencing a group larger than the immediate victims.



What is Terrorism?

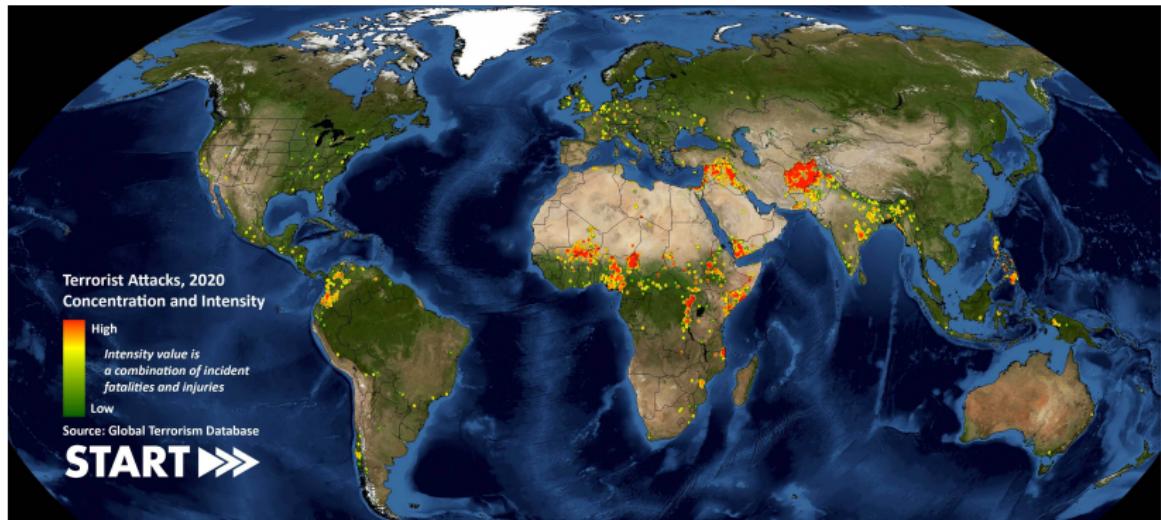
All terrorism is either:

- **Domestic:** involving perpetrators and victims from the same state.
- **International:** involves perpetrators and victims from different states and/or is intended to alter a foreign state's behavior.

Empirically, what does terrorism look like?



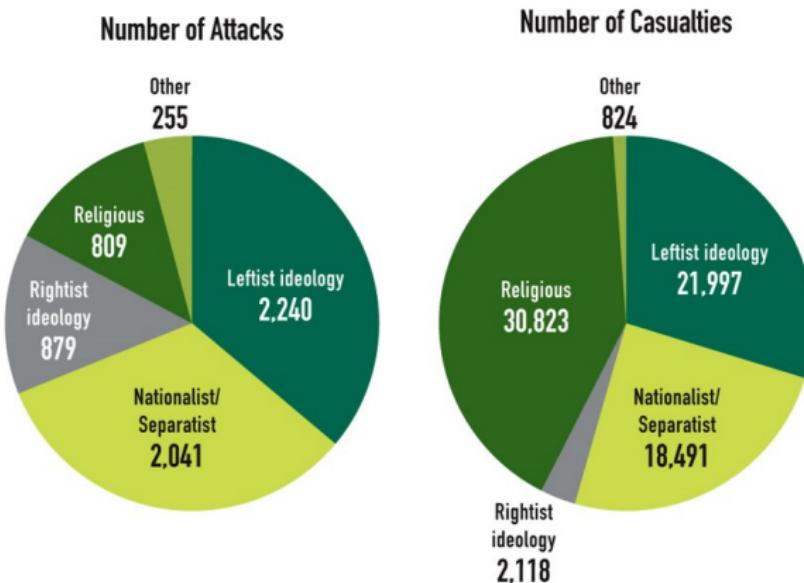
Terrorism in 2020





Terrorism Statistics by Group

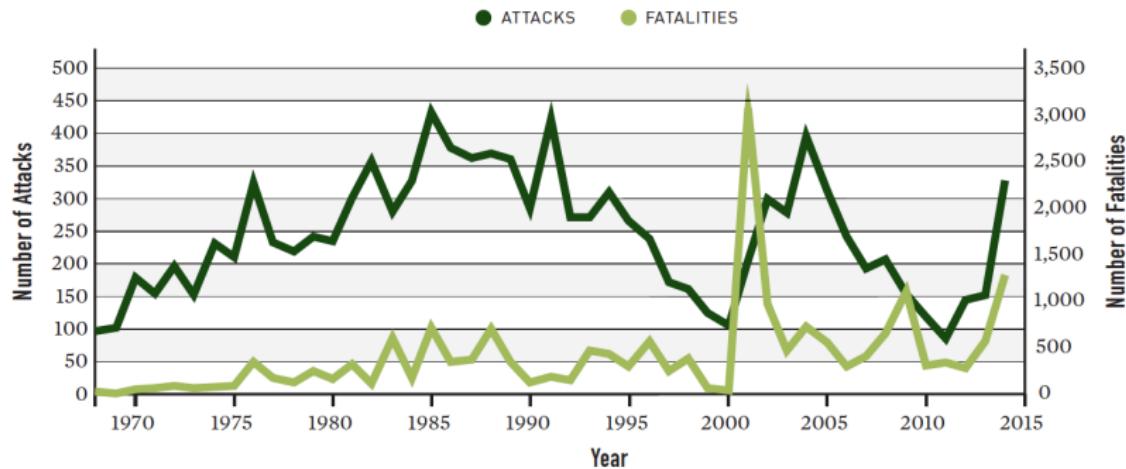
FIGURE 6.5 *The Number of Attacks and Fatalities by Group Goal, 1968–2005*



Source: James A. Piazza, "Is Islamist Terrorism More Dangerous? An Empirical Study of Group Ideology, Organization, and Goal Structure," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21 (2009): 63. Leftist ideology includes groups whose goals were characterized as anarchist, antiglobalization, Communist, Socialist, and environmental. Rightist ideology includes groups whose goals were characterized as racist, right-wing conservative, and reactionary.

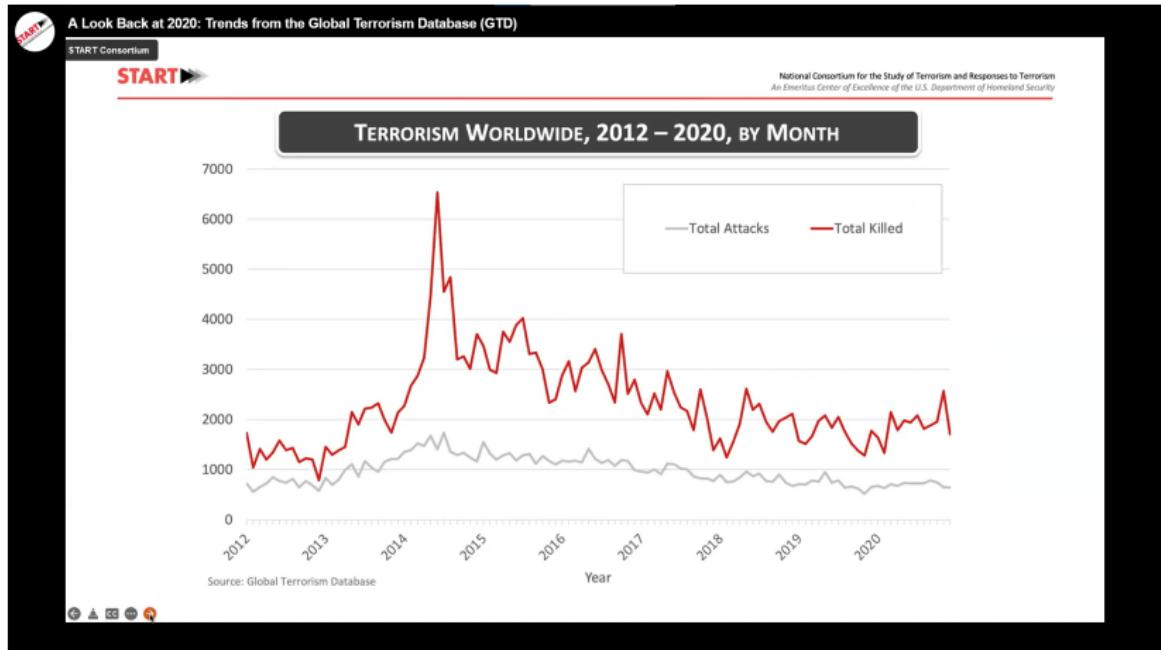


Transnational Attacks over Time





Worldwide Attacks and Fatalities

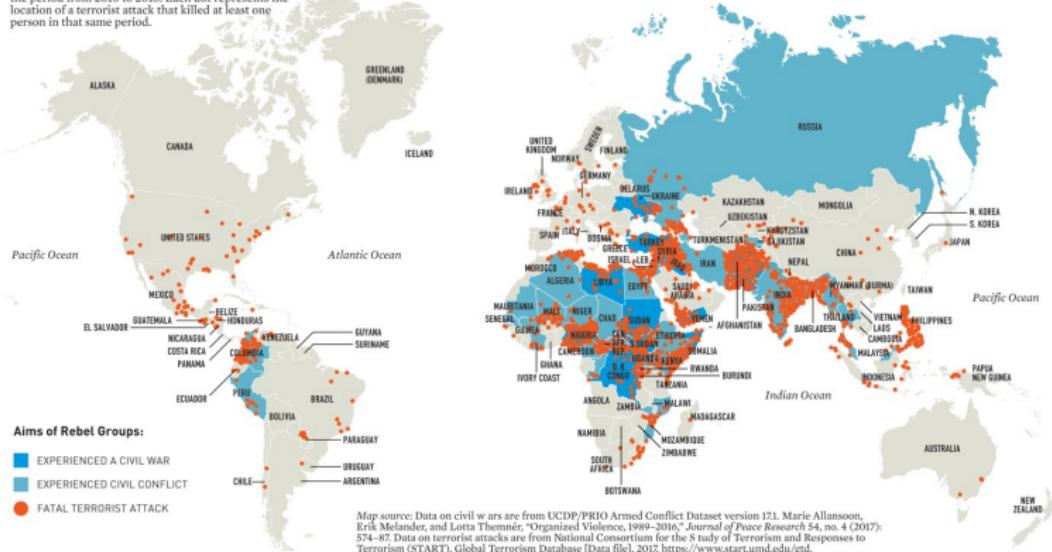




Civil War and Terrorism, 2010-2016

MAP 6.1 Civil War and Terrorist Attacks, 2010–16

This map depicts the countries that experienced a civil conflict (causing at least 25 battle-related deaths) or a civil war (causing at least 1000 battle-related deaths) in the period from 2010 to 2016. Each dot represents the location of a terrorist attack that killed at least one person in that same period.





Attacks and Fatalities by State, 2020

A Look Back at 2020: Trends from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)

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LOCATIONS WITH THE MOST TERRORISM, 2020

Country	Total Attacks	% Attacks	% Change Attacks 2019-2020	Total Deaths*	% Deaths	% Change Deaths 2019-2020
Afghanistan	2604	31%	44%	10081	44%	22%
Iraq	764	9%	19%	525	2%	-34%
Nigeria	478	6%	-6%	2102	9%	22%
Yemen	474	6%	-40%	903	4%	-29%
India	450	5%	-28%	212	1%	-32%
Democratic Republic of the Congo	310	4%	24%	1356	6%	111%
Philippines	294	3%	-37%	280	1%	-30%
Pakistan	294	3%	-19%	322	1%	-23%
Somalia	280	3%	-22%	885	4%	3%
Syria	256	3%	-13%	973	4%	-12%
Mozambique	220	3%	65%	709	3%	113%
Mali	138	2%	-1%	566	2%	-31%
Burkina Faso	110	1%	-32%	681	3%	-15%
Ethiopia	53	1%	104%	1330	6%	1502%
Worldwide	8438	100%	-1%	22847	100%	12%

Source: Global Terrorism Database

* Includes assailant deaths



Attacks and Fatalities by Group, 2020

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PERPETRATOR GROUPS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MOST TERRORISM, 2020

Perpetrator Group*	Total Attacks	% Change Attacks 2019-2020	Total Deaths**	% Change Deaths 2019-2020	% Perpetrator Deaths	Attacks Suspected
Taliban	1903	38%	8987	19%	52%	48
Houthi extremists (Ansar Allah)	397	-34%	820	-20%	44%	9
Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)	389	-16%	727	-42%	13%	8
Boko Haram	301	-14%	1898	-3%	28%	26
Al-Shabaab	292	-13%	882	-1%	46%	20
Communist Party of India - Maoist (CPI-Maoist) / Maoists	166	-30%	102	-30%	16%	6
Fulani extremists***	170	44%	425	0%	1%	80
New People's Army (NPA)	145	-26%	111	-30%	39%	14
Muslim extremists***	117	16%	562	27%	14%	19
Conspiracy theory extremists***	116	1833%	1	0%	100%	2
Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)	115	46%	724	110%	3%	3
Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO) militia	102	1600%	417	1338%	24%	0
Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)	19	-	834	-	-	0
Samri militia	1	-	766	-	-	0
Central Africa Province of the Islamic State	73	284%	572	292%	35%	1

Source: Global Terrorism Database

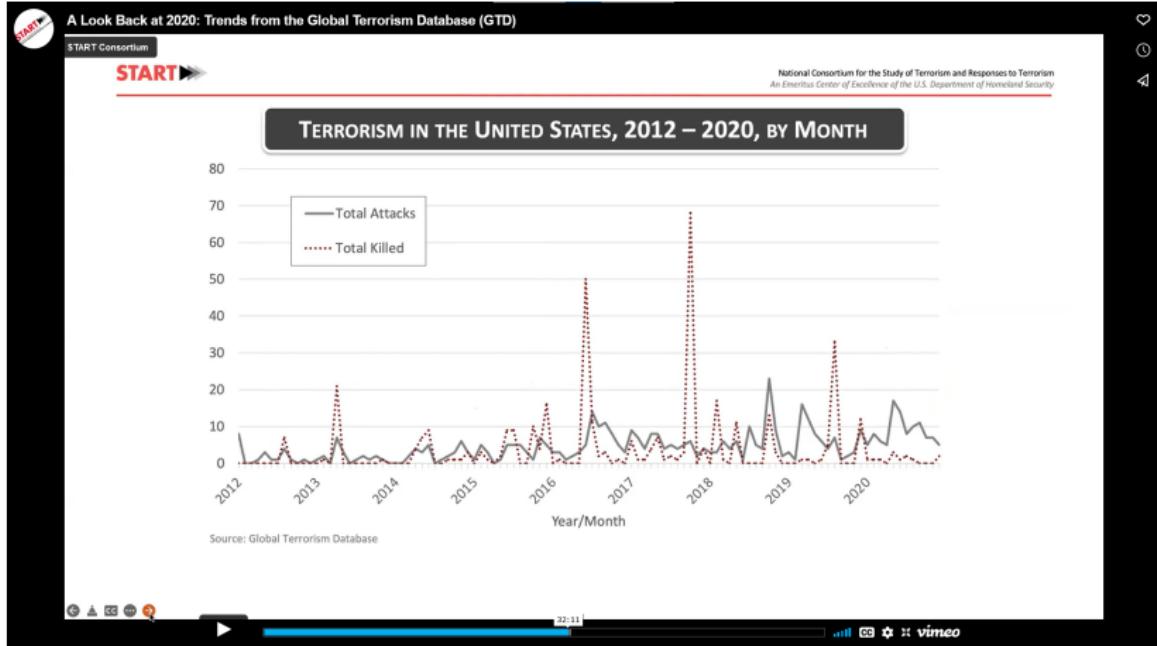
* 262 groups and organizations carried out attacks in 2020; 32% of all attacks were carried out by unknown perpetrator groups

** Includes assailant deaths

*** Generic identity classification; not a cohesive or comprehensive group



Terrorism in the US, 2012-2020





Perpetrators in US and Europe, 2020

A Look Back at 2020: Trends from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)

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PERPETRATOR GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES AND WESTERN EUROPE, 2020

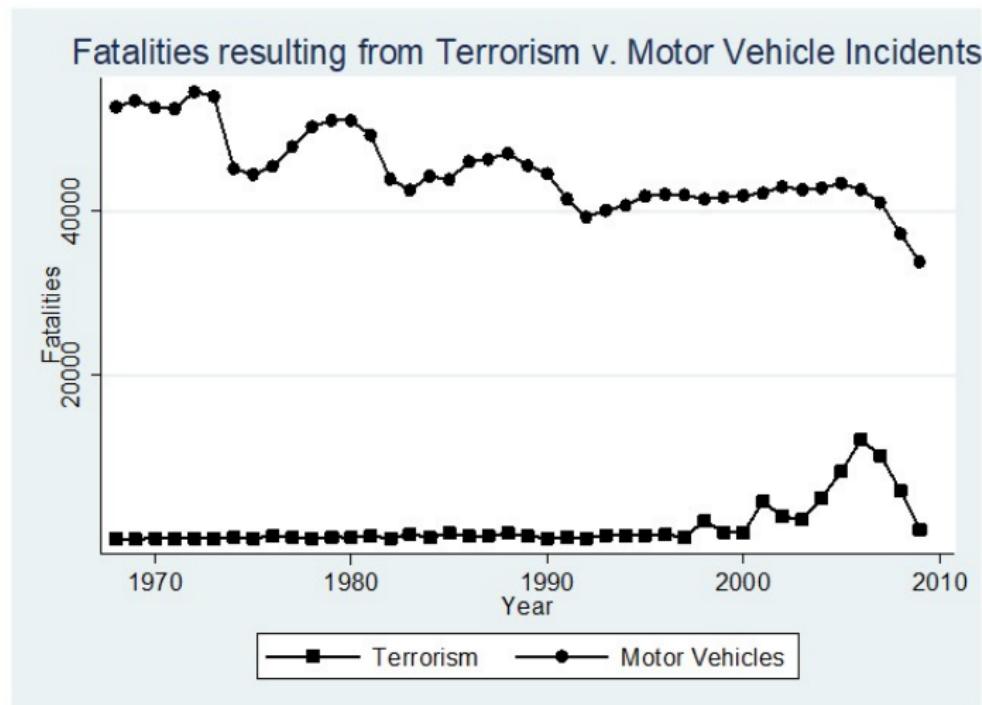
United States	Total Attacks	Total Deaths	Perpetrator Deaths	Attacks Suspected
Conspiracy theory extremists	9	1	1	0
White supremacists/nationalists	9	1	0	1
Anti-Police extremists	7	0	0	0
Anti-Government extremists	5	2	0	0
Boogaloo movement	5	2	0	0
Jihadi-inspired extremists	3	2	2	1
Anti-Religion extremists	3	0	0	0
Anti-Trump extremists	3	0	0	1
Left-wing extremists	2	0	0	2
Anti-Abortion extremists	2	0	0	0
Anti-globalization extremists	1	1	1	0
Anti-Muslim extremists	1	0	0	0
Shooters of the Nest	1	0	0	0
Anti-Christian extremists	1	0	0	0
Anti-LGBT extremists	1	0	0	0
Anti-Republican extremists	1	0	0	0
Ku Klux Klan	1	0	0	0
Anti-Semitic extremists	1	0	0	0
Pro-Trump extremists	1	0	0	0
Anti-White extremists	1	1	0	0
Anti-Fascist Activists	1	1	0	0
Incel extremists	1	0	0	0
Unknown	43	1	0	0

Source: Global Terrorism Database

Western Europe	Total Attacks	Total Deaths	Perpetrator Deaths	Attacks Suspected
Conspiracy theory extremists	76	0	0	2
Anarchists	24	0	0	5
Jihadi-inspired extremists	16	17	4	1
Anarchist Night Raid Teams	14	0	0	0
Muslim extremists	6	0	0	0
Anti-immigrant extremists	5	11	1	0
Dissident Republicans	4	1	0	4
Left-wing extremists	4	0	0	1
Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF)	3	1	0	0
Neo-Nazi extremists	3	0	0	0
Anti-Semitic extremists	2	0	0	0
Anti-Asian extremists	2	0	0	2
Anti-Government extremists	2	0	0	0
Action Directe Anarchiste (ADA)	1	0	0	0
Golden Dawn	1	0	0	0
Palestinian Extremists	1	0	0	0
Anti-Muslim extremists	1	0	0	0
Anti-Israeli extremists	1	0	0	0
Anti-LGBT extremists	1	0	0	0
Vulkangruppe Netzlherrschaft zerreissen	1	0	0	0
Rubicon (Rouvikonas)	1	0	0	0
Al-Mahdi in Southern Tunisia	1	3	0	0
Anti-globalization extremists	1	0	0	0
Corsican National Liberation Front (FLNC)	1	0	0	0
Zouaves Paris (ZVP)	1	0	0	0
Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA)	1	0	0	0
Generation Identity	1	1	1	0
Unknown	110	4	1	0



Terrorism vs. US Car Crashes





Terrorism Data Takeaways

From this data, we know that:

- Most terrorism is domestic, not transnational.
- Most transnational terrorism is not religious in nature.
- Terrorism, especially transnational terrorism, is not solely religiously motivated.
- However, religiously motivated terrorism causes disproportionately high casualties compared to other motivations.



Terrorism Data Takeaways

From this data, we also know that:

- Terrorism and civil war sometimes overlap, but the presence of one does not automatically mean the presence of the other.
- In an American context, terrorism is typically not carried out by Islamist extremists.
- Deaths from any type of terrorism are disproportionately covered by the media, leading to inaccurate risk perceptions ([further reading](#)).
- **You should not be worried about dying of terrorism in your daily life.**



The Rationality of Terrorism

- Public discourse routinely suggests that terrorists are bloodthirsty, crazed fanatics.
- Terrorism is a deliberately chosen *strategy*, which raises a question: is its use rational?
- Rational actors pick strategies that maximize their chances of getting the outcome they want.
- To determine whether terrorism is rational, we must determine why groups use it.



The Rationality of Terrorism

- The end goal of a strategy of terrorism is to extract concessions from an adversary, not by defeating them, but by inflicting costs on their civilians such that the state gives concessions to prevent those costs.
- Why choose terrorism over other strategies, such as participation in legitimate political processes or insurgency?
- Because actors using terrorism are generally weak in two ways...



Weakness 1: Capabilities

Terrorist actors have very weak capabilities.

- Nonstate actors can rarely match the strength of the state.
- If these actors can mobilize sufficient strength, they can engage in insurgency.
- Terrorist groups are generally even smaller and weaker than the insurgent groups that start civil wars.



Weakness 2: Demands and Extremism

Terrorist groups are weak relative to the magnitude of their demands.

- Groups using terrorism frequently make demands far beyond their power to reasonably achieve.
- Terrorist groups are also comprised of **extremists**, meaning that their goals and strategies for achieving them are not usually widely shared.
- This extremism limits both the size of their recruitment pool and their ability to engage in the political process.
 - Extremists cannot develop a broad enough base of support to engage in insurgency, much less in legitimate political competition.
 - Some extremist viewpoints are also excluded from the political process by design.



A Weapon of the Weak

- Extremist ideology has only limited appeal, and as such extremists are:
 - Unable to gain support for meaningful legitimate political participation.
 - Unable to generate enough popular support to mobilize for civil war or direct violent confrontation to achieve their goals.
- Given these limitations, **terrorism is a weapon of the weak, used to try to extract concessions from the target government.**
- Thus, **the use of terrorism is rational for such weak actors.**



How Does Terrorism Work?

Terrorism requires two elements: shock and randomness.

- **Shock:** terrorist violence is sensational and notable for its methods. For example...



ISIS Executions



رعايا الصليب من أتباع الكنيسة المصرية المخابرة

The people of the cross, the followers of the hostile Egyptian Church



How Does Terrorism Work?

Terrorism requires two elements: shock and randomness.

- **Shock:** terrorist violence is sensational and notable for its methods. For example...
- Terrorist violence tends to take forms that are not seen in “legitimate” warfare: suicide bombings, vehicles as improvised weapons, gruesome executions, etc.
- The goal here is a heightened, visceral emotional response.

This emotional response is paired with...



How Does Terrorism Work?

Terrorism requires two elements: shock and randomness.

- **Randomness:** terrorist attacks occur unpredictably, seemingly at random, frequently in crowded places where they interrupt everyday life of civilians.
- **The goal of any given attack is not to harm those specific civilians who were hurt, but to create fear in the broader population that the random nature of the attacks means they could be next.**
- This is further heightened by the visceral emotional response created by these attacks.



How Does Terrorism Work?

- Recall the definition of terrorism: committed “for the purpose of influencing a group larger than the immediate victims.”
- The whole point of an attack is to spread fear throughout broader society, **even though from a statistical viewpoint almost all citizens have nothing to fear.**
- The overarching goal of a terrorist group is to extract concessions from its target government, and this violence can (in theory) cause citizens to pressure their government to stop the terrorism - even if it involves making concessions.



Terrorism and Bargaining Failure

- Why don't states and terrorist groups bargain?
- While terrorism's costs may be lower than those of a conventional war or insurgency, they are still costs.
- If we expand our definition of costs to include psychological damage and the stress of constant fear on the general population, terrorism has sufficient costs that we would expect some kind of bargaining.



Incomplete information problems are endemic for terrorist groups:

- Terrorist groups are clandestine by nature, making them unable to show their strength without being exposed to capture by the state.
- Terrorist groups have substantial incentives to misrepresent strength, and the state knows this.
- Actually carrying out attacks may be the only way for a group to credibly signal its capabilities and resolve.



Commitment problems are similar to those facing rebels:

- As with disarming rebels, terrorists struggle to get a credible commitment that the state will not retaliate after they demobilize and reveal themselves.
- Fragmented terrorist groups may have leaders willing to honor a deal, but those leaders may be unable to prevent cells from engaging in attacks.
- Additionally, the state also knows that leaders have incentives to misrepresent their level of control.



Terrorism and Indivisibility Problems

Indivisibility problems may also occur:

- Terrorist extremist views may shrink the bargaining range.
- Terrorist ideology may lead them to make all-or-nothing indivisible demands.



Terrorist Strategies of Violence

- The end goal of a strategy of terrorism is to extract concessions from an adversary, not by defeating them, but by inflicting costs on their civilians such that the state gives concessions to prevent those costs.
- This implies the existence of multiple “audiences” for any given act of terrorism:
 - 1 Government of the target state.
 - 2 Population of the target state.
 - 3 The terrorist group’s claimed constituency (“home population”).
- This means that terrorism as a strategy can also be used for multiple different tactical aims.



Tactics of Terrorism

- 1 Coercion**
- 2 Provocation**
- 3 Spoiling**
- 4 Outbidding**



Tactics of Terrorism: Coercion

- **Coercion:** encourage policy change by engaging in violence and threatening future violence (implicitly or explicitly).
- Here, the attack itself is a form of costly signaling of terrorist resolve and capability.
- To be successful, target must care about these costs in some way:
 - Domestic politics favor negotiation (ex: doves vs. hawks).
 - Public perceptions of threat levels are (irrationally) high.
 - State has responded favorably (from terrorist POV) to prior attacks.



Tactics of Terrorism: Provocation

- **Provocation:** induce government into indiscriminate violence that pushes individuals to join or be sympathetic toward terrorist group's cause.
- To be successful, this requires the terrorist group's claimed constituency to be uncertain about the target's true intentions towards them.
- If terrorists provoke indiscriminate reprisal violence, this will confirm the worst suspicions of their constituency.
- Ex: most US drone strikes?



Tactics of Terrorism: Spoiling

- **Spoiling:** sabotaging a possible peace deal between a moderate group within a terrorist faction (and/or its claimed constituency) and the target state's government.
- To be successful, this must convince the target government that moderates cannot or will not prevent their extremists from engaging in future attacks.
- This sabotages the credibility of any deal.
- Ex: failure of Oslo Accords between Israel and Palestine.



Tactics of Terrorism: Outbidding

- **Outbidding:** occurs when two or more terrorist groups devoted to the same cause, attempting to draw on the same support base, use attacks to signal their superiority.
- Attacks help groups to signal their extreme views relative to each other. Their hope is that the support base views more extreme groups as more effective ones.
- Ex: Fatah vs. Hamas in Palestine



Does Terrorism Work?

- Substantial debate following 9/11 about whether terrorism is effective.
- Much of the debate about whether or not terrorism works boils down to how we define *success* for a group.
- Even so, the numbers do not look good...



Terrorism Success Rates

Study	Terrorists	Success Rate
Abrahms (2006, 43)	Terrorists in the RAND-MIPT and FAS databases	7%
Abrahms (2012, 375)	Terrorists on the FTO list	Under 5%
Cronin (2009, 81)	Terrorists in the MIPT database	Under 5%
Fortna (2011, 42)	Jessica Stanton's data on terrorist organizations in civil wars	Zero success
Jones and Libicki (2008, 19)	Terrorist groups that have ended since 1968* in the RAND-MIPT database	10%



Does Terrorism Work?

- Approximately 90% of terrorist groups collapse within 4-6 years of formation, as the state eliminates them or they fragment into splinter groups.
- Terrorist groups generally fail to accomplish their stated objectives before collapsing.
- In those rare cases of success, the group must survive and make attacks for so long that it can convince the state that it must be negotiated with (ex: Taliban circa early 2020).
- In rare instances the terrorist groups can extract concessions, but they generally fail to do so.
 - States may respond by hardening their positions; strikes may provoke a rally effect.



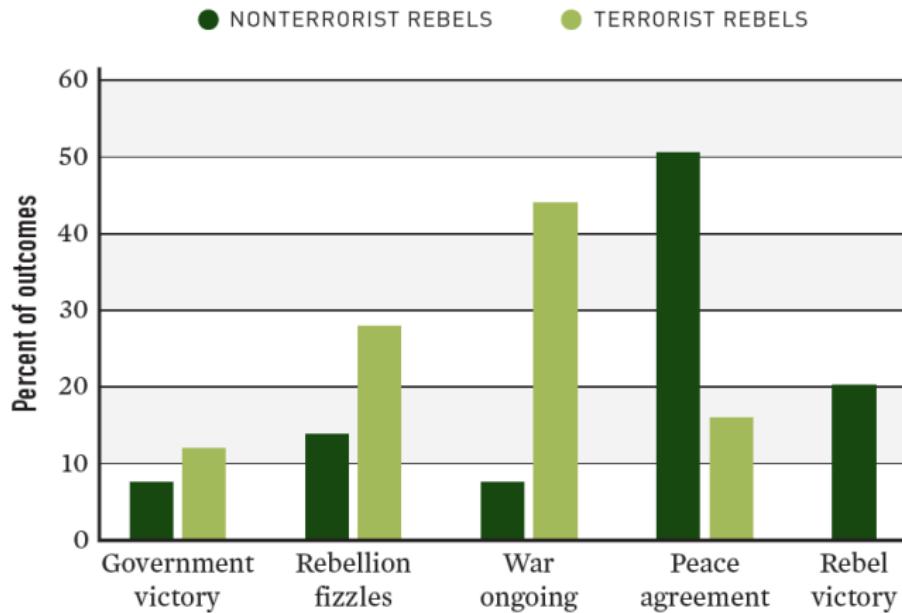
What About Terrorism and Civil Wars?

Earlier slides show a substantial geographical overlap of terrorism and civil wars.

- Fortna (2014) looks at the difference in outcome of rebel groups that use or do not use terrorist tactics.
- She finds that nonterrorist rebel groups are more successful.
- However, wars last longer when rebels use terrorist tactics.
- Rebels face a dilemma: terrorism might help a group survive, but will not help it to achieve its broader goals.



Terrorist Rebels in Civil Wars





What About Terrorism and Civil Wars?

Notably, one path to survival for terrorist groups is to transition into an insurgency.

- If a terrorist group can manage to become an insurgency, they may be more likely to succeed.
- Terrorist groups and insurgent groups both have low success rates, but those of terrorist groups are even lower than those of rebel groups.



States facing terrorism have several of options.

- 1 Deterrence**
- 2 Preemption**
- 3 Defensive measures**
- 4 Criminalization**
- 5 Negotiation**



Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Deterrence

- **Deterrence:** threaten massive retaliation for any given terrorist incident.
- If asked, most states would describe this as their default stance.
- To be successful, the state must be able to strike back with devastating force, in an accurate manner.
- Drawbacks and limitations:
 - Lack of credibility will hinder effectiveness.
 - Even when successful, it risks playing into a terrorism strategy of provocation.



Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Preemption

- **Preemption:** eliminate terrorist groups before they can strike (again).
- A primary strategy of the American War on Terror.
- Prerequisite: very high state capacity.
- Drawback is a very high cost in terms of material, committed state security forces, intelligence-gathering efforts, etc.



Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Defensive Measures

- **Defensive measures:** visibly raise the costs of executing attacks on a given target.
- Frequently involves making potential targets harder to infiltrate or harder to damage.
- Examples: intended purpose of TSA screening, bollards beside roads.
- Drawbacks:
 - Also costly (installing physical measures, training and paying staff)
 - As these measures are visible by definition, they may just shift attacks towards less-defended targets.



Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Criminalization

- **Criminalization:** reactive measure that requires strong international cooperation. Ensure terrorists lack safe haven states and that they will be extradited to face legal penalties for their actions.
 - Successful against airline hijackings in the 1970s.
- Drawbacks:
 - Requires strong international cooperation.
 - **Does not appear to meaningfully impact extremist group decisions.**



Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Negotiation

- **Negotiation:** state attempts to negotiate with the group to secure an end to the violence.
- Frequently a de facto last resort.
- Sometimes not even considered as a legitimate option. Ex: “we do not negotiate with terrorists” as a cornerstone of US and UK foreign policy.
- Drawbacks:
 - Like all negotiation, bargaining failure is possible and made more likely by information and commitment problems.
 - Inflexibility may lead to needless deaths, especially when other Western states frequently do negotiate with terrorists ([further reading](#)).



Preemption and the War on Terror

- Preemption strategies are the defining characteristic of America's War on Terror.
- America's declaration of a global War on Terror, following 9/11, was essentially a commitment to a global strategy of preemption by claiming the authority to strike at terrorist targets anywhere on the planet.



Preemption Strategies of the US

This preemption strategy has involved several elements:

- Extensive use of special forces (most famously to kill Bin Laden).
- Frequent use of detention, often indefinitely, without due process or oversight (e.g. Guantanamo Bay detainees and CIA black site program).
- Frequent use of torture (ex: waterboarding).
- Extensive use of drone strikes: remotely operated aircraft equipped with missiles.



Drone Strikes



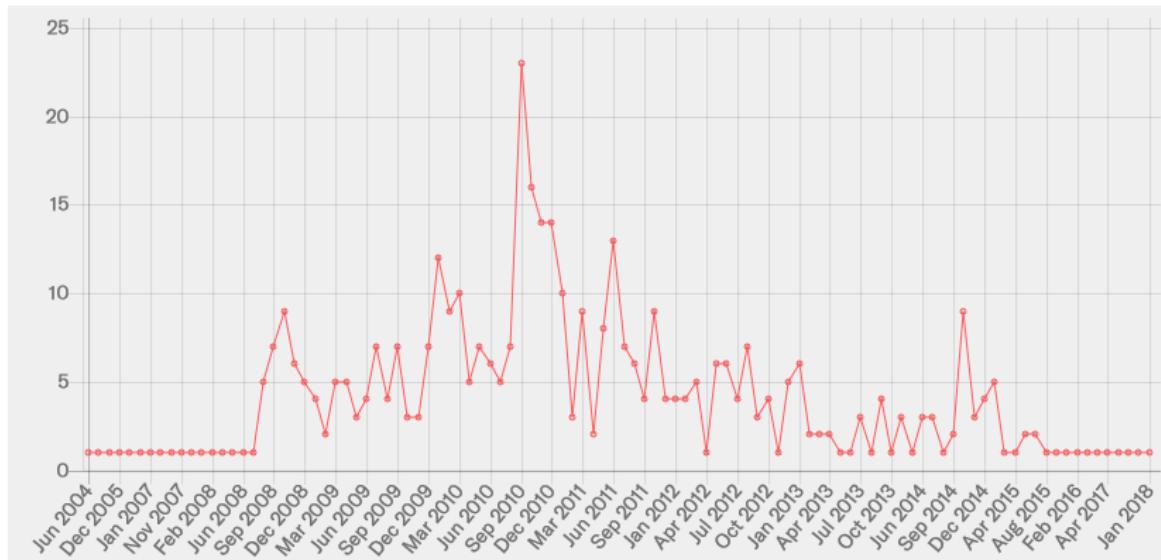


Drone Strikes as Preemption

- The US used drone strikes extensively in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Yemen and Somalia.
 - Note that the US was only formally at war in one of these states.
- The stated rationale was that these were precisely targeted, selective strikes against known terrorists conducted with zero risk to US military personnel.
- In Pakistan alone (all data from **TBIJ**)...

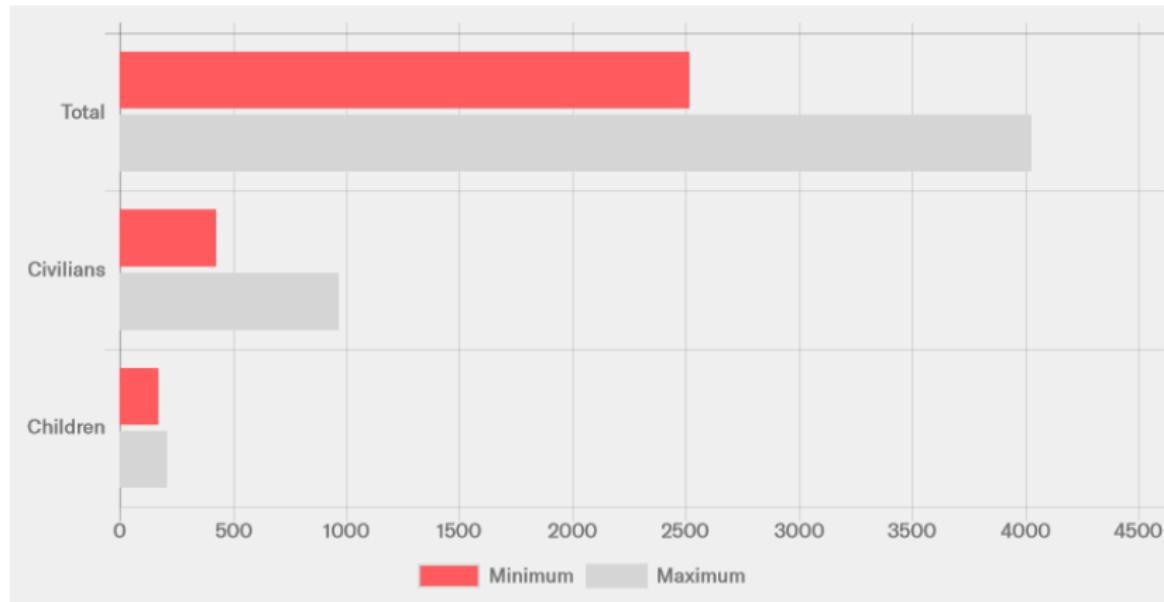


At Least 430 Drone Strikes in Pakistan





Casualties: 2,515-4,026 Dead





Drone Strikes as Provocation

Known erroneous drone strikes across the entire program included:

- Weddings
- Funerals
- Family gatherings
- Farming activity

What does this look like? **The US playing right into a strategy of provocation by Al Qaeda.**



Terrorism Summary 1

- Terrorism is a rational strategy.
- The ultimate goal of a terror attack is to influence the general population beyond the immediate victims.
- Terrorism is a strategy of weak, extremist groups that lack the numbers for civil war or legitimate political participation.
- Terrorist groups and states face acute bargaining issues.



Terrorism Summary 2

- Terrorism as a strategy of obtaining concessions is largely unsuccessful, and most terrorist groups fail.
- While terrorism and civil war overlap, they are not synonymous.
- Terrorism can be used as a tactic for multiple aims: coercion, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding.
- States have a variety of counterterrorism options, but must be wary of falling into a provocation trap.