

Transnational Terrorism

Written by Katherine E. Brown

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Transnational Terrorism

<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/19/transnational-terrorism/>

KATHERINE E. BROWN, JAN 19 2017

This is an excerpt from *International Relations* – an E-IR Foundations beginner’s textbook. Download your free copy here.

As had been explored in previous chapters, globalisation has brought with it not only unprecedented opportunities and progress in human development but also greater risks. Events in one economy can quickly spiral to others and the same can be said of social, cultural and political events. One theme that we have not explored in detail is how terrorism has evolved in the era of globalisation. Rather like the way in which the dark web piggybacks on the internet, a shadow side of globalisation gives criminal and violent groups the ability to spread their message and widen their operations. The impact of this shadow form of globalisation alters not only the organisation, resources and methods of such groups but also their reasoning and motivations. Under these conditions we have seen the proliferation of transnational terrorist groups with globalised agendas whose operations involve many countries or have ramifications that transcend national borders.

What is transnational terrorism?

Terrorism, whether transnational or not, is a highly contested arena. To date there is very little consensus regarding its definition. Disagreements emerge over the purpose and function, the perpetrators, the victims, the legitimacy and the methods and targeting of terrorist actors. Perhaps the most widely accepted attribute of the term ‘terrorism’ is that it is derogatory and a sign of disapproval. Typically, labelling a group as terrorist negatively affects our perception of the group’s legitimacy, legality and how they should be addressed. Therefore, how we differentiate a terrorist group from any other group is important. For the purposes of this chapter, terrorism is understood as the use or threat of violence by non-state actors to influence citizens or governments in the pursuit of political or social change. This is not only a semantic or academic debate; the label gives states considerable power to act and use violence against a group and it significantly guides how a state should act. Wrong definitions can lead to flawed counter-terrorism strategies. Moreover, as states cannot agree on the definition, they argue over both the nature and the cause of terrorism as well as who can be called a terrorist. With no agreed international law governing state responses, they struggle to work together to remove the threats. According to Acharya (2008), this permits states to act like vigilantes, or cowboys in the Wild West, on the global stage.

Rapoport (2004) divided the history of terrorist groups into four successive waves, each characterised by the global politics of the day. He noted that nationalist and anti-colonial groups emerged with a force at the end of the first and second world wars, while anti-communist and anarchist movements proliferated during the Cold War. Today it is argued that a new, or fifth, wave of modern terrorist groups are both products of and challenges to key ideas associated with globalisation, thereby giving terrorism a transnational character. It is important to note that some terrorist groups in the past had transnational goals, but they lacked the tools of the modern world to widen and deepen their message. Today’s transnational terrorism is seen to operate in many states, utilising the ‘shadow globalisation’ flows of people, weapons and information to further their cause. The causes of this new type of terrorism reflect the deepening of human interconnectedness worldwide. Peter Mandaville (2007), writing on one of the first groups to be designated as a ‘fifth wave’ terrorist group, Al-Qaeda, argued that their initial success was because they operated a global technology, mythology and ideology. Specifically, it was the mythology of military success against the United States in the form of the spectacular attacks of 9/11 and then drawing it into costly

Transnational Terrorism

Written by Katherine E. Brown

military activities abroad. Combined with the franchise-like nature of their organisation, they were able to claim responsibility for attacks all over the world by financially, logistically and materially assisting smaller groups that affiliated themselves to the organisation. Such affiliations were possible because Al-Qaeda promoted a global ideology that linked local causes together via an image of world politics that presented Muslims worldwide as victims of Western oppression. These components enabled them to function and replicate on a global scale.

Today's terrorism is therefore transnational in cause, operation and effect. Its essential features ensure its importance within international relations because it represents a whole new security concern for states: the risk of attack does not just come from other states (war) but from mobile criminal groups that move between states and are dispersed globally (transnational terrorism). States perceive this new wave of terrorism as threatening core elements of their sovereignty – their capacity, legitimacy and autonomy within a particular jurisdiction. This all-encompassing threat has led to a range of responses. These have included the creation of new criminal offences, broadened legal definitions of terrorism, the granting of greater powers of detention and arrest, as well as improving funding for state agencies involved in countering terrorism. In light of the transnational elements, states have also sought closer cross-border cooperation between government agencies, most notably in policing and intelligence, in order to prevent the spread of terrorism. States have also reacted to the new threats by seeking to prevent or disrupt the emergence of ideas that might support terrorist violence through anti-radicalisation initiatives. These are sometimes referred to as 'soft measures'. Overseas these include supporting development goals of other countries to facilitate their stabilisation and the production of moderate voices in politics. Within domestic jurisdictions, 'soft' counter-extremism policies include placing greater emphasis on challenging particular extreme ideas in schools and universities, monitoring citizens for signs of radicalisation and making illegal the ownership and distribution of material that glorifies violence. These forms of intervention bring the state more directly into contact with the everyday lives of citizens, often regardless of any laws broken. Such efforts demonstrate how terrorism is a concern for human security as well as state security because of the manner in which it affects everyday life.

Motivation and goals

Individuals join terrorist groups for a variety of personal and political reasons. They may join because most of their friends have, or for the feeling that membership of the organisation brings benefits. For example, the group Islamic State (also known as Daesh, ISIS and ISIL) seeks to establish a new theologically driven state in the Middle East and promises fighters from all over the world better living conditions and pay than they might achieve in their home countries. The ability to travel across borders more freely because of globalisation and the economic resources available to Islamic State in the form of oil make this possible. Individuals may also join a terrorist organisation because they strongly empathise and identify with the group even if they are not directly affected by the cause. Global online media can facilitate this identification by giving a cause a global appeal. It is important to note that what motivates individuals to join and remain in transnational terrorist organisations is not necessarily the same as the wider goals of those groups.

A key way of understanding why individuals join and remain part of transnational terrorist groups is radicalisation theory. Radicalisation is understood to be 'everything that happens before the bomb goes off' (Neumann 2013). It suggests that there are pathways to becoming a radical or terrorist and that it is a dynamic and very individualised process. Because of its individual nature, there is no single terrorist profile in today's transnational world, even in particular countries. Terrorists may be female, married, old, rich, have children – or not. Attempts to profile behaviours have therefore not been successful. The New York Police Department produced one of the early guides for 'spotting' radicalisation, which led to some seemingly bizarre characteristics (inability to grow pot plants, enjoying camping out) being identified as 'signs' of radicalisation (Silber and Bhatt 2007). The signs were problematic because they were so broad in their scope that almost everyone was potentially a suspect. What radicalisation research does show is that a quest for identity and greater significance in the world together with empathy for those who are suffering makes an individual more vulnerable to terrorist messages that appear to offer solutions (Silke 2008). Research also shows that an individual with friends or family involved with terrorism or supportive of terrorist views is more likely to join a terrorist organisation than someone with no connections at all (Wiktorowicz 2006). As a result, transnational lone-wolf actors are extremely rare despite their high profile and the media attention they receive.

Transnational Terrorism

Written by Katherine E. Brown

At the group level, goals are also transnational. This is best illustrated by looking at Al-Qaeda and Islamic State. These groups utilise a global religious language to create an understanding of global politics that divides the world in two. On one side is the world of Islam. This is a place of goodness, where religious laws are upheld and Muslims are not oppressed. On the other side is the world of war where Muslims are oppressed by unjust and tyrannical leaders. They argue that, because of the global connection Muslims have with each other as a community of believers (Umma), all Muslims should join them in their fight against the 'Oppressors', regardless of where they live. They also argue that because the 'Oppressors' are everywhere and attack Muslims everywhere, their cause and fight is global. They refer to the 'near enemy' (local governments) and the 'far enemy' (governments of global powers) as possible aggressors against whom a member of their organisation might fight. This enables them to tap into local political grievances and give them a global religious veneer, or to highlight global incidents and claim that they are related to their local cause. What is notable is the degree to which such an understanding of the world replicates (or is replicated by) some Western governments' thinking that also sees the world as 'either with us or against us'.

It is important to note that the logic of worldwide oppression that shapes Islamic State and Al-Qaeda thinking is not representative of the bulk of the world's Muslim population and is widely condemned by Islamic scholars. It is also important to note that while most of the coverage of terrorist events seems to focus on high profile events in Western states, the majority of those killed in terrorist attacks worldwide since 2001 have actually been Muslims, living in Muslim-majority countries. This is because of a range of factors. First, it is easier to target less well-protected and defended sites in poorer Muslim-majority countries. Second, ideologically, Muslims that resist jihadist violence are demonised as unbelievers by those groups and therefore become 'enemies' who can be killed. Finally, violent actions are often targeted to alter the relations between governments and citizens in the Muslim world and improve the strategic position of the terrorist group (Mustafa and Brown 2010).

Activities

Despite the consequences of transnational terrorism primarily being felt in Muslim majority-countries, fear and awareness of the threats is felt strongly in Europe and North America. Terrorism is a 'communicative act', by which we mean it seeks to send a message that goes beyond the actual destruction caused to life and property. That message is to be heard by three groups of people. The first are civilians either local or globally who witness the events. The second are governments which are called upon to respond to the terrorist violence. Finally, the third are potential supporters who are attracted to join by the terrorist actions. We will now look at each of these three groups in turn.

Transnational terrorist groups focus on the location of attacks as much as, if not more than, who is attacked in order to generate a wide message. The importance of location is demonstrated by the attacks in Paris in 2015 by the Islamic State group. Paris is one of the most visited cities in the world and the group targeted 'everyday' places – bars, a football stadium and a rock concert. This signalled the idea that anyone and anywhere is a target, increasing fear of and publicity for the group's actions. This targeting strategy is in contrast to that of groups which may act across borders – such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban, working in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, or Boko Haram, operating in Nigeria and neighbouring countries – but for which the local political scene remains key. With the Tehrik-e-Taliban, their actions, while linked to a global cause of 'jihad', are local. They target beauty shops, police stations and market squares because they see these as opposed to the way of life they want to establish in their lands. Boko Haram too targets villages across different countries' borders and punishes those who don't conform to their new laws, which are about 'everyday living' even as they claim allegiance to a wider global political cause. However, this is not to say these groups do not target individuals. The Tehrik-e-Taliban tried to kill the activist Malala Yousafzai because of her support for girls' education and Boko Haram kidnapped hundreds of Christian schoolgirls in Northern Nigeria. Schools are targets because they are seen to promote state agendas, and schoolgirls are targets because these groups wish girls to have an Islamic education that focuses exclusively on domestic responsibilities and learning the Quran. Malala Yousafzai has gone on to campaign against this understanding of Islamic education and promote women's schooling the world over, winning a Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts. In addition, the Nigerian military was forced to take a more active stance against Boko Haram due to global outrage over the kidnappings. Thus, while these are 'local' causes and local targets, they are global and transnational in their wider effects.

Transnational Terrorism

Written by Katherine E. Brown

The second feature of transnational terrorism is that activities are sometimes designed to provoke states into action as well as generate fear in populations. Attacks are frequently symbolic in purpose and often have a high casualty rate for maximum shock value. It was inconceivable, for example, that the United States would not respond to the 9/11 attacks or that France would not react to the Paris attacks. Here, attacks are designed to provoke states into doing something to prove they are protecting civilians, even when that action may undermine the values they live by or end up being so costly that popular support for government is eroded. This terrorist strategy was first formulated by Che Guevara, a leader of revolutionary communist movements in Cuba against the American-sponsored authoritarian Batista government. The approach is known as 'focoist' (or focoism), whereby terrorists imagine themselves as the 'vanguard' of popular revolutions. The Uyghur ethno-separatist groups (which now have links to regional Islamist terrorism) operating in China's north-western provinces have been applying this strategy for over a decade. Their attacks are seen to have provoked ever-greater Chinese crackdowns on the civil liberties of people living in affected provinces in order to provide security and to demonstrate the strength of the central government. Yet the government has failed to reduce the number or severity of the attacks and also failed to stop people joining the separatists. Some have argued that European counter-terrorism policies are more reactionary than effective because they follow the same pattern of government suppression of human rights in the name of security as the Chinese example. The disproportionately felt impact of counter-terrorism legislation on Muslim communities across Europe is, critics argue, providing more propaganda for the Islamist groups' recruitment campaigns.

The expectation of many terrorist groups is that, in time, ever greater numbers will realise they are oppressed and join resistance groups or that, with sufficient coverage, the international community will come to support their cause. The example of Palestine underlines this well, since, despite decades of political struggle – which has included terrorist tactics – to establish Palestinian independence from Israel, the Palestinian cause remains relatively popular domestically and internationally. On the other hand, rather than *creating* something (an independent Palestine), this tactic may also be used to *destroy* something. Here, we can point to the 9/11 attacks and the many years of terrorism that followed as bait to lure the United States into engagement in the Middle East as a means of undermining their political and economic stability. By this logic, first Al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State group pursue strategies that aim to grind down the global power and image of the United States so that it may no longer be willing or able to interfere in Muslim lands.

In the past, countries have managed to resist reacting to these sorts of violent action by terrorists. Consider Italy's reaction to the assassination and kidnapping of the popular prime minister Aldo Moro by the socialist Red Brigades: during the investigation of Moro's kidnapping, General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa reportedly responded to a member of the security services who suggested torturing a suspected Brigade member, 'Italy can survive the loss of Aldo Moro. It would not survive the introduction of torture' (Dershowitz 2003, 134). However, with public and media scrutiny operating at speed and levels not previously encountered, the ability of governments, especially democratically elected ones, to resist pressure is significantly reduced. The crossover with popular culture is interesting too, with military ethicists reporting a 'Jack Bauer effect' – referring to the tendency of this character in the TV series '24' to torture individuals as time runs out to stop a terrorist attack. Bauer's tactics often reflect (albeit in dramatised form) the enhanced interrogation tools that many governments have used in response to terrorism. Pressure is also placed on governments by allies and neighbours demanding support and action. For example, there has been a considerable chilling of relations between Thailand and Malaysia since 2004 because Thai authorities believe Malaysia to be turning a blind eye to Thai Muslim separatists operating across the border.

Finally, the third reason for terrorist violence is to recruit members and reinforce loyalty and membership among existing supporters. Extremely violent or highly technical attacks demonstrate the capability and will of the group carrying out the attack and its overall support. We see support for Islamic State coming from citizens in nations of every region because their attacks are dramatic and spectacular, which raises the profile of the group and demonstrates their military mastery. Mandaville (2007) calls this the myth of success. Islamic State group videos and propaganda frequently assert the weakness of the opposition as demonstrated by their deaths. The videos dehumanise their opposition, treating them like cattle or computer game characters in first-person shooters. The use of videos that mimic computer game imagery is supplemented by Islamic State creating its own 'skins' or 'maps' for popular computer games. In its version of Grand Theft Auto, the city is Baghdad and the people opposing you are the

Transnational Terrorism

Written by Katherine E. Brown

police and the military. As one British supporter said of their life in Syria under Islamic State, 'it's better than that game, Call of Duty'. Members say how they will 'respawn in Jannah' – 'respawn' being a gamer word for 'reincarnation' or 'being reborn', and Jannah is paradise in Islam. This is clearly designed to recruit and sustain membership by linking to Western masculine experiences (Kang 2014).

Organisation and resources

Managing such a transnational organisation and connecting to multiple locations and identities requires considerable logistical and organisational capability. The practice of tapping into the local and the global can be described as a 'plug and play' approach. Transnational terrorist organisations not only have an ideology that 'plugs' into local grievances, their organisational structures and resources also operate in this manner.

One of the main claims about transnational terrorist groups is that they are not hierarchical in structure but rather cell-like and even anarchical, lacking a formal leader. This led Marc Sageman to talk about a 'leaderless jihad' (2008). He characterised Al Qaeda as a loose-knit amorphous organisation, a position which was hotly contested by Bruce Hoffman (2006). Hoffman seems to have lost the argument, as terrorist organisations are becoming increasingly decentralised as they take advantage of new technologies, forms of communication and other aspects of globalisation. Consequently, communicating with transnational terrorist groups can be difficult. Negotiators cannot be sure the people they are talking to are representative of the group or have sufficient leverage to influence other members of the group, and splinter groups are more likely under these conditions. There are risks and vulnerabilities for terrorist organisations associated with this approach, notably in relation to information and operational security, coordination issues and resilience. There are also advantages in terms of longevity: the lack of central leadership gives them a greater scale and scope of operations and makes opposing or destroying them very difficult.

Rather than focusing on individuals, it is more helpful to focus on processes. One of the key processes within transnational terrorist organisations is the distribution and acquisition of money and equipment. Here we see the connections to transnational crime – particularly the smuggling of human organs, drugs and guns and human trafficking. Criminals can provide terrorist groups with whatever they require, provided the price is right, and terrorists will engage in or tolerate criminal activities when it serves their needs. Failed states offer fertile ground for possible and profitable connections between terrorism and criminality. The US government's National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (2006) contends that terrorists exploit failed states, using them to 'plan, organize, train, and prepare for operations'. However, some scholars disagree, noting that few international terrorists emerge from failed states (Simons and Tucker 2007) and most failed or failing states are not predisposed to exporting terrorism (Coggins 2015) – though they generate significant security problems for their own citizens and neighbouring states. What is worth noting is that states that are weakly governed, rather than failing, are also implicated. Pakistan is one such example – and was where Al-Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden was living when he was killed by the US military in 2011 during a covert operation. This occurred, incidentally, without Pakistan being informed: the United States could not assume that he was there without the knowledge of elements of Pakistan's government, which is often accused of having state links to terrorism.

Countering transnational terrorism

The consequence of terrorism operating transnationally is that states have been presented with a number of decision points about when and how to intervene, and these are intimately connected. The first set of decisions is about where to intervene. Some Western states have been tempted to intervene internationally in order to prevent the emergence of terrorist groups or minimise the efficacy of existing terrorist groups in 'frontline' states. Such intervention comes in the form of international aid, military advice and training, and financial and military support to governments. This has entailed the risk of supporting undemocratic governments and engaging in militarised activities in contested spaces. The use of drones by the United States in Pakistan is one instance that has given rise to considerable controversy. First, because of the transnational element potentially undermining Pakistani sovereignty. A second point is that it imposes a state of fear on ordinary civilians, who find themselves under threat of strikes termed 'surgical' or 'targeted' by those operating them but which feel and are perceived as random by civilians in these areas (Coll 2014). Such operations can actually help terrorist groups by giving them a narrative to spin their agenda around,

Transnational Terrorism

Written by Katherine E. Brown

reinforcing local fears of an aggressive Western intervention in their societies that must be opposed.

A parallel approach has been to intervene at home by increasing state powers to minimise the effects and capability of terrorist groups to attack in Western societies. The consequence however, whether at home or overseas, has been to reduce civil liberties and restrict human rights. It is presumed that there is a necessary balance between human rights and human security and that protecting citizens, namely their security, is the first duty of government. However, a counter-argument is that failures to uphold these basic principles reward terrorist behaviours by treating them as 'outside' usual criminal processes, while at the same time punishing law-abiding citizens. Indeed, the human experience of counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation policies and processes has been overwhelmingly negative. We can see this in the crackdown on protestors in Egypt, including journalists and civil rights groups, in the name of fighting terrorism. Human Rights Watch (2015) has reported that Egypt is undergoing the most serious human rights crisis in its modern history, with the government invoking national security to muzzle nearly all dissent. Egypt has attempted to justify these policies in light of transnational terrorist actions and the existence of opposition groups that appear to have overseas links with terrorist organisations. Similar patterns are seen in Turkey, especially following a failed coup attempt in 2016.

In Western nations, state attempts to impose security have often disproportionately affected certain groups – especially Muslims. The transnational element is perhaps most keenly felt at airports. Blackwood, Hopkins and Reicher (2013) found there was a 'prototypical' Muslim story of travelling through airports that was characterised by discrimination, humiliation and fear because of the actions by airport and border authorities. The ability of states to use violence so that a 'state of fear' is produced for (a section of) a population even when in the name of countering terrorism has even led some to call for the definition of a terrorist actor to include states (Jackson 2011, Blakeley and Raphael 2016). Those researching in the field of critical terrorism studies advocate this approach, arguing that the only significant difference between terrorism by state and terrorism by non-state actors is the agent carrying out the act of violence. For example, when the Israeli military attacks a Palestinian group this is commonly seen as 'defence' or 'national security'. But, when a Palestinian group attacks an Israeli troop convoy, which they perceive as invaders or occupiers, they are commonly deemed 'terrorists'. If we remove the binary of state and non-state actors, we might see this instead as a conflict between two opposing forces – both sharing legitimate aims and objectives. Due to examples such as this, complex and emotive as they are, there is often a failure to fully examine state actions that critical scholars blame for a significant cause of human insecurity worldwide. It is also important to look beyond the state toward civil society and everyday acts of resistance.

Conclusion

Terrorism, and terrorists, are transnational in three ways: their goals, their actions and their organisational form. However, we must be cautious before assuming that this is the new, and only, form of terrorism. Not all terrorism is transnational. Terrorist groups like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) still operate at the national level, targeting just one state. States too have shown themselves capable of inflicting forms of terrorism. Furthermore, while examples of transnational terrorism since 2001 may appear to be mostly religiously inspired, one cannot conclude that there is anything inevitable about this, or that Islam specifically is the significant factor. Rather, it is in this instance that Islam provides a framework for some marginal groups to construct a convincing worldwide counter-narrative to that of a world dominated by Western political, social and economic models. For that reason, it is perhaps no surprise that Islamic terrorism, over and above other types of terrorism, has become a sustained issue of concern in international relations. An important note to conclude on is that countering terrorism does not fall exclusively to the state: civil society and everyday acts by ordinary people also have a role. These can include examples of popular culture, inter-faith dialogue and moments of solidarity that break down the oppositional and binary world view that dominates transnational terrorist ideology. Nevertheless, terrorist groups are products of their time and, just like us, live in a globalised world. They are both shaped by globalisation and contribute to it by their actions.

**Please consult the PDF linked above for any citation or reference details.*

Transnational Terrorism

Written by Katherine E. Brown

About the author:

Katherine E. Brown is a Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Birmingham. She specialises in religious terrorism, radicalisation and counter-radicalisation with a focus on questions of gender.