The Viability of Deterring Terrorism

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In the twenty-first century, terrorism has become ubiquitous in international relations and its study. Some believe that today's terrorism is a new phenomenon, citing its predominantly Islamic fundamentalist nature and rising prevalence. But terrorism is nothing new in the history of international relations. Terrorism is in some ways the volcano of international relations – sometimes it sends rumbles through society and sometimes it even changes the socio-political landscape; but at other times it lies dormant as an ineffective tool of politics. September 11, 2001 was the metaphorical eruption of modern terrorism. Technological advances in information communications, like the Internet and twenty-four hour news media outlets, gave new effectiveness to the messages that could be raised through terrorism. But what is the mechanism of international relations that can deal with this offshoot strategy of modern warfare? The United States was quick to fight violence with violence in the form of military retaliation; yet, nearly ten years later, the threat of terrorism is just as worrisome. Terrorism cannot be eliminated because it is self-sustaining – kill one terrorist and inspire a hundred new ones. As Paul Davis warns, "To imagine that [terrorism] could be easily stigmatized out of existence would be both ahistorical and naïve".[1] If terrorism cannot be eliminated, then states must seek a policy of terrorism management, and deterrence is one possible strategy for limiting terrorist acts. This essay will seek to evaluate the strategic potency and viability of deterrence as a counterterrorism policy through examination of its theoretical and practical underpinnings and then through observation of several modern day case studies.

Before one can delve into the effectiveness or pragmatism of deterrence policies, one must first have an understanding of the basic definitions and explanations of terms important to this essay. First, it is important to note that nearly every terrorism scholar and school of thought has its own definition of terrorism; in the case of this writer, it is no different. Terrorism shall be defined as "the incitement of, or threat to incite, terror by arbitrary killing of civilians in an attempt to maximise gains in a conflicting political or religious relationship".[2] For purposes of this essay, terrorism will be limited in scope to mean non or sub-state actors/organizations that operate internationally to further a political or religious cause. Terrorism will be treated as a tool of politics used by the out-group (minority) as a mouthpiece to voice grievances and effect change from the in-group (state). Also of importance to this essay is the delineation between the Conflict Theory and Orthodox approaches to the understanding of terrorism. Conflict theory seeks to understand terrorism through an interdisciplinary approach, taking into account the social, economic, political, and cultural factors that influence terrorist organizations, while maintaining a broad perspective on the definitions of terrorism. The Orthodox theory of terrorism simplifies the terrorism equation a bit by maintaining a state-centric view of terrorism and pursuing counterterrorism policies in line with standard Westphalian military policy. With the definition and terms of terrorism established, one must now understand what is meant by 'deterrence' in the context of counterterrorism.

A simple way to think about and understand deterrence is through the context of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union both wanted to effect socio-political change in the other and built up a stock of nuclear weapons in an effort to deter an attack from the other side. In this example, to borrow a definition from Patrick Morgan, deterrence is the "threat of *military retaliation* to forestall a *military* attack".[3] But the Cold War definition of deterrence will not suffice in the context of twenty-first century terrorism. As explained by the aforementioned definition of terrorism, terrorist attacks are carried out by non-state actors against non-military personnel. For this reason, the Cold War perception of military deterrence does not hold up. Deterrence shall be defined as "preventing an action by influencing another actor's decision-making through creating an anticipation the action in question will

lead to negative results or consequences."[4] In simpler terms, deterrence is a policy that threatens punishment for inappropriate actions. Unlike conventional weapons of war, deterrence is a weapon of image and perception. A state needs only to create the perception that it has the means and intent to administer a costly punishment that outweighs the benefits of an attack. The point of deterrence is to prevent terrorism without ever having to dole out that punishment. Deterrence is a policy that supports a "war of attrition" strategy. There are two classes of deterrence: international relations deterrence and criminal deterrence. Both are imperative to understanding how a state can effectively use deterrence as a counterterrorism strategy.

On the one hand, deterrence in international relations is a threat of retaliation by extreme force that is made prior to a terrorist attack. The intended outcome is that a terrorist organization will go through a traditional cost-benefit analysis and deem its attack not worth the consequences. On the other hand, criminal deterrence is the threat of severe and lengthy penalties to be applied after the terrorist attack. These two sub-sections of deterrence are in a struggle for primacy in the application of deterrence to counterterrorism: "While terrorism is a criminal offence, responses to terrorism do not fit entirely within the traditional penal approach to deterrence that is applied to the majority of crimes. Similarly, the status of terrorists means that the international relations approach to deterrence may not be entirely appropriate either."[5] In Jacqueline Gray and Margaret Wilson's 2006 study of 178 British university students, diplomacy with terrorist states was generally considered as 'deterrence', while military action was perceived as 'vengeance'. This finding suggests that counterterrorism military operations do not send a deterrence message, but rather invigorate would-be terrorists. As a result, military operations are classified as "preemptive attacks", and deterrence, as a counterterrorism strategy, is understood to be a threat of diplomatic action and criminal prosecution intended to diminish the attractiveness of terrorist activity; however, the definition still is not yet complete.

Boaz Ganor describes three types of deterrents: general deterrents, defensive deterrents, and punitive deterrents. General deterrents are "aimed at causing a terrorist organization to renounce its terrorist ways and to completely stop perpetrating terrorist attacks"[6], and are the least effective in the short-term. Defensive deterrents prevent terrorism by focusing on the defense of specific targets; and while it is an effective short-term strategy, in the long-term, a terrorist group will only reprioritize its targets: "Efforts to deter terrorist events often displace the attack to other venues, modes of attack, countries, or regions, where targets are relatively softer."[7] Finally, punitive deterrence "aims at deterring the [terrorist] organization's activists from participating in terrorist activity".[8] General deterrence and punitive deterrence may appear to be one in the same, but the key differentiating feature is general deterrence's focus on the terrorist *group* and punitive deterrence's focus on the *individual*. One can now settle on an understanding of deterrence as a non-military strategy that aims to prevent terrorism through the protection of sensitive targets and through the creation of incentives to keep prospective individuals away from the last-option political tool of terrorism. Whether deterrence is a viable counterterrorism strategy remains to be explored.

In some ways, deterrence might actually work against preventing terrorism. That is to say that as the intensity (in military force terms) increases, so does the resolve of the terrorist to carry out future attacks. Just as an animal adapts to changes in its environment to survive, "it is certain that the deterrent will motivate the deterred organization to develop new capabilities – means and methods that will allow it to overcome its inferiority in the face of the deterring nation, and thus, neutralize the deterrent."[9] This is essentially the spiral of violence dilemma; a strategy of relentlessness may only make the enemy relentless as well. A simple but disastrous pitfall of a policy of deterrence is the enforcement and repetition of its threats. As Ganor points out, "Another pivotal issue is the degree to which the threat has been used before. Oft-repeated threats against the deterred organization are liable to diminish the threat and reduce effectiveness."[10]

Deterrence can also be ineffective as terrorists "feel they have nothing to lose or are motivated by religion or other ideologies in which martyrdom plays an important role".[11] On the one hand, trying to create an environment inhospitable to certain actions is difficult when the out-group disregards and even welcomes the threatened repercussions. It could be said that a deterrent threat must be greater than a person's threshold for punishment. When that person's threshold is above death, then that is the proverbial "trump card". As Ganor clarifies, "It is hard to assess how messages of deterrence will be received by and impinge upon the terrorist organization as their values are usually different from the values of their adversaries. They have other frames of reference and above all, another

attitude toward risk factors."[12] As there is no threat higher than death, deterrence appears to become null and void as a counterterrorism strategy. But, in keeping with the thought that terrorist organizations have different values and frames of reference than their adversaries, one must change his thinking. It may appear that a terrorist who is not afraid to die has nothing to lose and cannot be deterred. But if one can remove himself from his own values and walk the proverbial mile in the terrorist's shoes, it is clear that he has much to lose.

Many terrorists come from areas with poor socio-economic conditions like unemployment and low levels of education, though this is certainly not a prerequisite – many other terrorists, like Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the failed Christmas Day bomber of 2009, come from very prominent families. Either way, one common theme among terrorists is their deprivation of or dissatisfaction with materialism. Whether coming from a life of having nothing or of having everything, the common structural causation for joining terrorist organizations is to find purpose and give meaning to one's life. Here is the junction where the need for a change of thinking about deterrence becomes crucial; if a man is so discontented with the state of his life that he is willing to give it up for meaning and purpose, then punishment by force is no threat at all. In fact, death or imprisonment is a reward. Instead, deterrence policies must focus on what terrorists have to lose: respect, prestige, legitimacy, carrying out God's will, and martyrdom.[13]

On the other hand, one might argue that the same principle that appeared to have defeated deterrence can also work in its favor when applied in the opposite direction. In plain words, if less is done to deter terrorism, perhaps the effect of terrorism will diminish proportionally as well. The ultimate aim of the terrorist is not to kill people, but to use death and terror as a catalyst for publicity, respect, and change. The immediate victims of terrorism are those that are killed, but they are chosen at random – chosen specifically are the millions of victims watching the media coverage in terror at home. Should the public's threshold for terror increase, then the terrorist loses his power as publicity decreases; an action without a response, emotional, physical or otherwise, is insignificant. However, this argument is at best theoretical and at worst impractical in real-world application. As Davis reminds, "It is practice, rather than theory, that is difficult."[14] A society cannot numb itself to terrorism, nor can a government control the media's reporting of terrorist attacks. One of the toughest aspects of terrorist warfare is that it forces the majority to fight back in ways that are fundamentally against their core values.

End goals and aims constitute another dimension to the argument against a deterrence strategy. In the Westphalian system, states employ diplomacy or force to effect political or economic change. For some terrorist groups, this is also true; but for others, terrorism is not the means to the end, but the end in itself. "Groups that do not measure their success in terms of a desired political change, but rather to the extent to which they are able to sow fear, injure the populace, and humiliate the government, have very little to lose and it is therefore extremely difficult to deter them."[15] The complexity of terrorist organizations and their relationship with the international system paints a dim prospect for a strategy of deterrence. But deterrence is not so narrowly defined; like any organization, there are many external factors and actors that the terrorist organization relies upon that are open to influence or control.

Terrorist groups employ a classic hierarchical organizational structure, but their non-state designation creates the need for external financiers and support from state and non-state actors. The rules of the Westphalian system do not account for a hybrid-actor of this type. But this grey area is not to the detriment of the counterterrorist. "Even if the terrorists are not generally deterrable, specific terrorist actions may be deterrable even today."[16] Additionally, "we know supporters of terrorists can often be deterred."[17] Terrorist organizations are not self-contained, self-sustaining entities. In order to operate, a terrorist organization needs funding like any non-profit organization might need. The source of funding of terrorist organizations is somewhat speculative as they do not file a tax return, but it has been widely publicized that some states finance and harbor terrorists, with the finger being pointed at Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, among others. Western states and neighboring Middle East states can impose political and economic sanctions on these countries that would make the harboring of terrorists unattractive.

An advertising campaign is currently running in the United States that warns citizens that the sale of illegal drugs indirectly finances terrorism. In war-torn Afghanistan, one of the largest (albeit illegal) industries is the growth of poppy plants for the production of opium. This is clear example of a policy of deterrence: through the threat of serious criminal penalties, the United States is deterring the sale of illegal drugs that will indirectly affect the financing of terrorism. In this sense, deterrence is akin to the strategy of a military siege: cut off the resources of the enemy

and conflict will begin to appear a less attractive option. In the case of terrorism, if operational finances diminish, terrorist organization will be forced to look for new means of projecting their grievances. While a counterterrorist benefits from a deterrence policy against known aides of terrorist groups, he must also remember that that complex hierarchical organization mentioned earlier sows its own seeds of deterrence. Paul Davis elaborates: "[Terrorists] often mistrust and fight amongst each other, disagree, and vary in conviction. It should be possible, then, to turn them against each other by disinformation and deception. It may also be possible to convince them that their particular actions may ultimately work against their cause."[18]

With definitional and theoretical underpinnings explained, examination of real-world case studies will complement the theory side of deterrence with an observation of its practical implementation. Recently, in January 2010, the Mossad (the national intelligence agency of Israel) assassinated a senior Hamas member/weapons dealer in Dubai in what appeared to have been a preemptive attack to deter future acts of terror by Hamas. Though the Mossad has a policy of neither confirming nor denying its operations, the assassination has been attributed to the Israelis and well illustrates the debate about the effectiveness of deterrence policies. Israel chose a para-military action as a form of deterrence, but as evidenced by Gray's survey, the assassination has only been perceived as vengeance and it is unlikely that the killing will go without future retaliation from Hamas. Additionally, the conspicuous nature of the assassination (Mossad team was on CCTV throughout operation) deals a bit of a blow to any deterrence strategy Israel was exploring. As previously stated, deterrence is a weapon of image and perception. The amateurish execution of the operation diminishes the threat as it suggests that the Mossad are careless and can be defended against. One can imagine that Hamas leaders will now travel internationally with more care and secrecy than before. Arce describes the struggle of striking a balance between a strategy of preemption and deterrence: "By protecting all potential targets, preemption provides public benefits; in contrast, by deflecting the attack to relatively less-guarded targets, deterrence and/or defensive measures impose public costs. The irony arises because nations have a pronounced proclivity to resort to deterrence rather than preemption despite the greater social gains usually associated with the latter."[19] One cannot deny that the preemption will have an immediate short-term effect of deterring terrorist actions by Hamas; that is, of course, until Hamas finds a new weapons dealer. Driving a terrorist organization underground with an attack provides only a short-term benefit as the group benefits from planning a new attack without being under the watchful eye of its enemy.

The United States' "war on terror" provides another modern day case study on the use of deterrence against terrorism. The war on terror began as an Orthodox approach retaliation on Afghanistan, the state that harbored Osama Bin Laden and was believed to have financed him as well. But just two years after September 11th, the Bush administration began to pursue a policy of preemption, marked most notably by the United States invasion of Iraq. The preemptive strike by the United States did little to deter future terrorist attacks as insurgents and terrorists began to flood into Iraq from around the Middle East to aid in the fight against the West. "[The war on terrorism] may be perceived as a deterrent to other potential terrorists by showing the consequences of any future acts of terrorism. However, the literature related to the deterrence of crime suggests that the factors associated with effective deterrence are not clear."[20] One must also keep in mind that terrorists are a minority who feel unable to go through normal political channels to effect change. Therefore, condemnation as a form of deterrence by those that the terrorists oppose is simply another case of the in-group oppressing the out-group. As Gray affirms, "If the perpetrators of the attack of 9/11 see the war on terrorism as an unfair punishment, this theory would predict a defiant increase in terrorism, rather than any reduction due to deterrence."[21]

The war in Afghanistan has yielded positive results as the Taliban's control has diminished, though their presence still remains. In this sense, the military action after September 11th has had some deterrent effects as new schools have been built and more freedoms have been introduced to society. But as is consistent with the double-edged blade of military action, the deterrence benefits are moderated by a flourishing illegal drug trade and terrorists inspired to help the Taliban beat back the Western force. Iraq has provided, unfortunately, one of the clearest pieces of evidence that preemptive force is not a deterrent to terrorists. In fact, preemptive force in Iraq brought Al Qaeda to Iraq, effectively introducing international terrorism to a state that had not previously had it. On a positive note, a deterrence tactic developed in South America has proven effective around the world: "The U.S. government has established a policy of not paying ransom, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that such a policy has severely discouraged attacks against U.S. government employees and officials with the purpose of extracting ransom."[22]

This has been seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, as proportionally few contractors and soldiers have been captured and held for ransom.

Domestically, the United States has pursued a counterterrorism policy of deterrence with mixed success, with specific attention to defensive and punitive deterrents. Though limited in quantity, several trials have already been held for conspirators of 9/11, as well as other individuals involved with smaller terror plots in New York City, with criminal sentences being handed down in the latter instance. September 11th is considered to be the largest coordinated terrorist attack to date, but these punitive deterrents have classified the living perpetrators not as skilled political martyrs, but as common, despicable criminals. Mired in controversy and questions of legality, the Guantanamo Bay detainee camp in Cuba has potentially served as a deterrent to would-be terrorists; however, it is more likely that media coverage of the stories of alleged wrongful imprisonment actually work to support of the terrorist message, and will translate into future terrorism and terrorists, rather than punitive deterrence. In terms of defensive deterrents, airports, national holiday celebrations, and major sporting and political events have all received special attention and extra security since 2001, but one area in which defensive deterrents could be improved is the technological sphere. Protection of physical targets has been successful so far, but the effective use of information in the deterrence of terrorism has yet to materialize. For instance, where physical checks failed to detect explosives in the underwear of the attempted Christmas Day bomber, a simple comparison of available information (a one-way ticket and no checked baggage) might have deterred the man from boarding the plane before he even reached airport security. It is the opinion of this writer that the strongest advances in deterrence policy ultimately will be discovered or lost in the manipulation of technology.

Deterrence seems like a simple and effective concept, but after examination and consideration, it has shown itself to be a complex and intermittently successful counterterrorism strategy. Does its erratic and unpredictable success rate make deterrence useless as a possible counterterrorism policy? No. Rather, deterrence presents itself as the greater of two low percentage policies in the fight against terrorism – as Lawrence Freedman explains of deterrence, "There will be a degree of bargaining, but acceptance of second-best solutions will have to be judged against the precedents that might be created for the future".[23] Military force yields lower success rates in comparison to deterrence as it perpetuates the spiral of violence dilemma and legitimizes the political causes of terrorist organizations. The "war on terror" can no longer be perceived as the war to eradicate terror. Terrorism can be limited by deterrence, but it cannot be eliminated by force. States fighting terrorism can and should employ defensive and punitive deterrence as a policy/strategy to combat terrorism. Terrorism is not a new phenomenon; if it was born as a last resort instrument of politics for the out-group, then creating new political outlets for terrorist groups can deter it. By offering political alternatives, states can hope to make terrorist acts a less attractive option and potentially force terrorism into a dormant state. The effects of deterrence are largely immeasurable because it is more difficult to account for the events that do not happen, and always latent in comparison to the results of the use of force. Even still, deterrence is not only a possible strategy in counterterrorism, but also perhaps the most effective as well.

The most effective tool of counterterrorism is also its least visible. If deterrence is to be used as a successful strategy, it must be specific and discriminating in its application; general deterrence will not work, but defensive and punitive deterrence have traction in counterterrorism exactly because of their attention to the individual. Defensive deterrence works with specific threats and targets with the least amount of infringement on civil liberties. Attacks can be averted without requiring the public to be on guard and frightened every day. Punitive deterrence removes the political legitimacy of a terrorist group by treating the terrorists' actions as strictly criminal; remove the story and myth for which the terrorist fights and his tactics are not that of a hero, but of common criminal. "Deterring terrorism" is too vague a concept. Deterrence as a counterterrorism strategy depends on a bottom-up approach; a top-down approach, at best, creates a negative trickle-down effect. States must deter problematic socio-economic systems in order to prevent the individual from seeking out extreme measures for self-worth, which will, by extension, ultimately deter the terrorist organization. Paul Davis sums it up best: "It is essential to understand that a strategy of deterrence is the wrong concept – it is both too limiting and too naïve. It is far better to conceive a strategy with an influence component."[24] A critical theory approach to counterterrorism policy evaluation reveals a strategy of deterrence to be not only possible, but also the best choice in the fight against terrorism.

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