

# Does Terrorism Work?

Written by Olusola Samuel Oyetunde

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## Does Terrorism Work?

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Terrorism is one of the most widely discussed issues in the twenty-first century due to the increasing terrorist occurrences and its destructive impacts, especially since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Terrorist incidences in the world reached its peak in 2014 with about 16,903 attacks leading to 32,658 fatalities (Global Terrorism Index, 2015). However, there was a fifty-two per cent reduction in the number of deaths associated with terrorist incidences in 2018 compared to 2014 (Global Terrorism Index, 2019). While there is a decline in the number of deaths attributed to terrorism, its impact remains prevalent. For instance, there is an upsurge in the number of countries that experienced terrorism in 2018 with at least one causality from seventy-one countries, which is the second highest in the past twenty years (Global Terrorism Index, 2019). The increasing nature of terrorist attacks has led to the intensification of scholarly interest in terrorism and terrorism-related issues. To this end, prior research has examined the definitions, causes, effects and strategies used by terrorist groups (Halliday, 2001; John, 2014; Elu and Gregory, 2015). However, it seems that the few studies that have examined the effectiveness of terrorism as a means of political struggle have been inconclusive.

In order to understand the reason for the continued existence of terrorism and its proliferation, it is crucial to examine if terrorism works, that is, if it achieves its stated objectives. This essay will contribute to the ongoing discussion on the effectiveness of terrorism by arguing that the answer to the question “Does terrorism work?” depends on our definition of “terrorism” and “work”. These concepts are a subject of debate, and as a result, there may not be one formula for measuring whether terrorism is effective. Thus, the success-level of terrorism is determined by various factors, especially by how it is evaluated. For example, while Dershowitz (2002:13) understands success in terms of attracting media attention and securing temporal concessions, Abrahms (2006:51) perceives it as the achievement the organisation’s central strategic objectives. Consequently, this essay will contend that although terrorist organisations rarely achieve their strategic goals, they often succeed in the achievement of other objectives.

The essay will adopt Richard English’s (2016) approach to the understanding of success by classifying success into four levels: strategic, partial strategic, tactical and inherent reward. This classification is appropriate because it allows for the integration of views and arguments of scholars, who have contributed to the debate on whether terrorism is an effective method of political struggle. The study will be divided into three sections. First is a conceptualisation of “terrorism”, followed by a discussion of scholarly views on the effectiveness of terrorism. Furthermore, there will be an assessment of the success of terrorism using Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram as case studies.

### The Concept of Terrorism

In order to examine whether terrorism works, it is pertinent to give a working definition of terrorism. Terrorism is essentially a contested concept, which lacks a universally accepted definition (Schmid, 2004:383). The definition of terrorism often mirrors the concerns of the definers, labellers and the labelled, who selectively exempt themselves and their actions and include others under the term (John, 2014:2). Therefore, the existence of several and often-conflicting definitions makes the classification of terrorist acts and activities challenging, which subsequently affects how we measure if terrorism works. Pape (2003:345) found terrorism to be an effective strategy because he focuses on suicide terrorism and defines terrorism as the utilisation of violence by non-state organisations to threaten and intimidate the population. On the other hand, Abrahms (2006:55) perceives terrorist organisations as non-state

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actors, who carry out violence against civilians and, as a result, maintains that terrorism does not work. The focus on different aspects of terrorist acts by Pape and Abrahms led to the different categorisation of terrorist organisations, which influenced their conclusion. Hence, their findings would have been different if they had perceived terrorism and terrorists differently.

The definitions of terrorism can be broadly categorised into actor and strategy based and it seems that neither of these approaches is totally adequate. For example, the US Department of State (2010) defines terrorism as deliberate, politically driven violence perpetrated against civilians by non-state actors or secret agents, usually to influence the public. However, this actor-centric definition is narrow because it does not include violent acts committed against combatants and violence perpetrated by the state. Consequently, the adoption of this conception when evaluating the effectiveness of terrorism will lead to the exclusion of groups that target combatants. Besides, violent acts carried out by states against other states or their citizens will be rejected when assessing the success of terrorism because the definition does not see state actors as terrorists.

Conversely, Jackson (2007:17) defines terrorism in terms of strategy or tactics used by both state and non-state actors for political purposes. He perceives terrorism as a means to achieve some stipulated political ends. Thus, terrorism is seen as a process of employing various techniques to instil fear in a target audience. Some of the strategies employed by terrorists include intimidation, attrition, provocation, spoiling and outbidding (Kydd and Walter, 2006:51). Moreover, the strategic account of terrorism opens up the idea of state terrorism, which means that violent acts committed or sponsored by states are classified as terrorism. However, this definition is problematic because it fails to distinguish terrorist acts from similar actions committed by other entities (Freedman, 2007:315). For example, describing terrorism as a method implies that there is no clear distinction between terrorists and freedom fighters, who can use threat and violence to further their cause. Therefore, defining terrorist groups in reference to their strategies will create a problem of differentiation in their categorisation, which could affect how the success of terrorism is measured.

Terrorism in this essay will be understood by integrating the actor and strategy-based perspectives. It will be seen as the use of various tactics by state and non-state organisations against both combatants and non-combatants in the pursuance of social, political, economic and religious objectives. From this definition, it is observable that terrorists pursue various goals. The use of different reference points in terms of the objectives of terrorists by scholars contributes to their contrasting conclusions about its effectiveness. While Abrahms (2006) focuses on the ability of terrorist groups to achieve their central strategic objectives, Pape (2003) concentrates on the effectiveness of suicide terrorism, a tactical objective.

Keeney and Winterfeldt (2010:1804) studying the objectives of Al-Qaeda, divides them into three categories: means, fundamental and strategic. They refer to the expulsion of Western states from the Middle East and the establishment of an Islamic caliphate as a strategic objective. The attainment of some of Al-Qaeda's fundamental goals, such as recruitments and the infliction of economic loss on the United States, is prerequisite to the achievement of the strategic goals. Finally, means objectives include the training of insurgents and winning of media battle (Keeney and Winterfeldt, 2010:1812). The fact that most of the objectives are overlooked by scholars when measuring the success of terrorism indicates that there is more to be known before deciding whether terrorism works (Krause, 2018:3).

## Theoretical Background

There are two opposing perspectives on the effectiveness of terrorism. The first view argues that the reason for the growth in terrorism is because it works. Dershowitz (2002:12) contend that terrorists are rational individuals who participate in terrorism when it pays for them and desist from the act when the cost is too high. He argues that terrorist groups often engage in a calculation of the cost and benefit of their decision to attack civilians because they believe that it is effective (Dershowitz, 2017:13). Furthermore, he concludes that terrorism will persist if the global community continues to reward it by offering concessions to terrorists. Similarly, Pape (2003:349) asserts that terrorism is effective against democracies because the population is sensitive to civilian casualties, which prompt governments to grant concessions.

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Moreover, Gould and Klor (2010:1507) opine that terrorism is an effective strategy because it led to the willingness of countries like Israel to accommodate some of the terrorists' demands, such as granting territorial concessions. Echoing this view, Rose and Murphy (2007:186) perceive the Madrid Train Bombings on March 11, 2004, as an instance of terrorist success because it led to the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq. Some scholars such as Hoffman (2006:55) therefore conclude that the continued use of terrorism by groups is an evidence that it works. However, it should be noted that the continued use of terrorism does not necessarily mean that it works. The continued occurrence of terrorist attacks might also mean that the causes of previous attacks were not resolved or that the conditions for the emergence or continued existence of terrorism have continued to exist in some areas, such as political instability, discrimination of groups, poverty, insecurity or state failure, among others (Gurr, 1993; Thurston, 2017, UNDP, 2017).

The second perspective argues that terrorism does not work. Abrahms (2006:44) argues that the success rate of terrorist groups is extremely low, which is an indication that they rarely accomplish their policy goals. Using the twenty-eight groups designated by the US Department of States, he found that the terrorist organisations achieved only three of the forty-two political goals and none of those who attack civilians achieved their objectives. In a later article, Abrahms (2007:225) contends that terrorism is an ineffective tactic against democratic states because democracies are not likely to make territorial concessions. Furthermore, Cronin (2009), who studied 450 terrorist campaigns recorded in the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism database, found that eighty-seven per cent of the groups failed to achieve their strategic objectives. He further states that most of the successes achieved by the organisations are tactical. In the same vein, Fortna (2015:520) maintains that the use of terrorism as a tactic in civil war may be successful in prolonging the war but is unlikely to achieve the terrorists' ultimate political goals.

As a result of limited research, there is a disagreement over the efficacy of terrorism as a method of political struggle. Therefore, it is necessary to consider an alternate method of evaluating terrorist effectiveness, which integrates the works of these scholars.

### Measuring the Success of Terrorism

The term "success" is subjective and value-laden, making it difficult to arrive at a consensus definition. The nebulous objectives of some terrorist groups, such as ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda, often contributes to the difficulty involved in assessing the effectiveness of terrorism (Krause, 2010:3). The majority of research on whether terrorism works embrace a unitary approach by focusing on the strategic objectives of terrorist groups, thereby ignoring the possibility of attaining their means and fundamental objectives. Consequently, researchers will continue to arrive at different conclusions due to the lack of agreement on what it means for terrorism to work. Therefore, it is crucial to clarify the meaning of success when discussing the effectiveness of terrorist groups. English (2016) gives a balanced assessment by dividing success into four levels, which aim to accommodate the arguments made by various studies in order to create a comprehensive understanding of whether terrorism works. The four classifications of success include strategic, partial strategic, tactical and inherent reward. These levels of success enable us to see the outcome of terrorism not only from the perspective of scholars and the government but also from terrorists' standpoint.

#### *Strategic Success*

The first level identified by Richard English is Strategic success. Strategic victory implies the achievement of the stated central goals of terrorist organisations. These goals, which are often ideological, vary between terrorist groups but in general, aim to compel policy change. The measurement of strategic success of terrorism often requires long-term assessment because the focus is usually on the impact of terrorist acts against states and society (Krause, 2010:4). Prevailing studies indicate that terrorism is ineffective in the attainment of some strategic objectives such as the creation of a new state, ending military occupation and winning of warfare. Al-Qaeda, for instance, has not been able to achieve their ultimate objectives of expelling the United States from the Middle East, the destruction of Israel and establishment of an Islamic caliphate (Keeney and Winterfeldt, 2010:1806). Abrahms (2006:65) blames the failure of Al-Qaeda on their poor communication strategy, which often leads to the public misperception of their motive. He notes that the US population inferred from the 9/11 attacks that the primary goal of Al-Qaeda is to kill and

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destroy, which did not lead to public sympathy with their cause (Abrahms, 2006:56). Thus, the strategic objectives of Osama Bin Laden were not achieved by the strategy of violence, as illustrated in table 1.

Moreover, the strategic objectives of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which were initially affiliated with Al-Qaeda's, include the formation of a regional caliphate in Iraq and the Levant, worldwide expansion of Islam and the recreation of the power and glory of Islam (Siebert, von Winterfeldt, and John, 2016:31). Siebert et al. (2015:23) state that the significant difference between ISIS and Al-Qaeda is the former's demand for power. Although ISIS and its affiliates have successfully carried out attacks and partially control some territories, the group is yet to achieve any of their overarching objectives. According to the RAND Corporation (2017), ISIS controlled about one-third of Syria and forty per cent of Iraq during its peak in 2014. However, the group was defeated after losing its last territory to US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in 2019, casting doubt on the possibility of establishing a worldwide Islamic caliphate and achieving their strategic objectives. Therefore, these examples demonstrated that the attainment of strategic success is usually elusive.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of terrorist movements is an indication of the type of objectives they pursue (Özcan, 2018:96). Only a few terrorist groups have achieved maximalist goals, which are often ideological because they often require the target government's compliance. One possible cause of the strategic failure of terrorist groups is that most of their primary goals threaten state sovereignty. Therefore, government tends to employ draconian measures, which are designed to threaten the existence of terrorist groups and to counter the threats of violence. If terrorist operations have no chance of accomplishing central goals, there would not be an overreaction from the target state. The Global War against Terrorism declared by the United States after 9/11 (O'Connell, 2004:350) is an example of how a government response can affect the strategic success of terrorist organisations because it led to a worldwide collaboration to wage war on terrorism. Similarly, the counter-terrorism strategies of the national and regional governments to the violent acts of Boko Haram, an ISIS aligned Jihadist group based in North-East Nigeria, have prevented the group from achieving their primary objective of creating an Islamic state in Nigeria (Onapajo, 2017).

However, this does not mean that terrorism does not achieve strategic success at all. Terrorism works but only in rare cases. Historically, it could be argued that the act of violence employed by the Zionists against the Palestinians in Mandate Palestine and the British, which then led to the creation of the state of Israel, was an act of successful terrorism (English, 2016). Similarly, Rose and Murphy (2017:187) perceive the 2004 Madrid bombings, carried out by a group affiliated to Al-Qaeda as a strategic victory because it led to the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq. It seems, however, that these cases of strategic victory are minimal, compared to the larger evidence of general lack of strategic success, as discussed earlier. As shown below, terrorist groups are more successful in terms of the achievement of their other (non-strategic) goals.

### *Partial Strategic Success*

Though terrorist organisations rarely achieve their primary strategic objectives, they may partly achieve a diluted version of these goals (English, 2016). The achievement of partial strategic victories by terrorist groups could contribute to the attainment of strategic success. Thus, instead of establishing a caliphate or securing independence, terrorist organisations might be successful in securing greater power or autonomy from the state. For instance, the Irish Republican Army was able to achieve partial sovereignty for much of their territory in the early twentieth century (English, 2016). Similarly, the control of some territories in Iraq and Syria by ISIS could be seen as an example of partial strategic victory. After gaining control of the territories, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the ISIS, declared the organisation a caliphate in 2014 having its military, economy and government (Jones, 2017:56). A formal bureaucracy was established in the caliphate with institutions based on strict adherence to Islamic principles. According to Duyvesteyn and Peeters (2015:1), the caliphate attracted over 31,000 foreign fighters who travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic state. This figure does not include other professionals who also travelled to join the caliphate. The ability to maintain state institutions and attract foreigners could be seen as a success. Hence, the proclamation of an Islamic caliphate in those occupied territories represents a partial strategic success because it could aid the achievement of ISIS ultimate objectives of establishing an Islamic caliphate in the Middle East.

Partial strategic victory can also involve the attainment of secondary goals such as revenge against an adversary for

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perceived humiliation or damages. Croin (2017) contends that the 2004 Madrid bombings by groups linked to Al-Qaeda were retaliation for Spain's involvement in the war in Iraq. The attacks were successful and constituted a partial strategic victory because it compelled policy change in Spain by ending their military occupation in Iraq. In the same vein, the November 2019 London Bridge knife attack was inspired by ISIS as revenge for the death of their leader (Nikolic, 2019). Similarly, the execution of eleven Christians by the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a splinter group of Boko Haram in 2019, was believed to be a retaliation for the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (BBC News, 2019). The success of these retaliatory attacks is an indication of partial strategic victory of terrorist groups.

Furthermore, English (2006) argues that partial strategic success also includes influencing national and international dialogue in order to divert global discourse to the cause, issues and acts of violence perpetrated by terrorist organisations. The 9/11 attacks helped to shift the attention of the United States and her allies to the activities, motives, capabilities and demands of Al-Qaeda more than ever before, which could aid a total withdrawal of western force from the Middle East. Therefore, some terrorist groups might fail to achieve their strategic goals but can be successful in achieving their partial strategic goals.

### *Tactical Success*

The achievement of strategic and partial strategic victory will be difficult without the achievement of tactical success. Tactical victory refers to the success of a single or series of terrorist operations (Marsden, 2012: 137). Krause (2010:5) argues that the tactical success of terrorism denotes the capacity of terrorist groups to effectively execute attacks by delivering the desired cost in the desired location to the desired target and at the desired time. Tactical effectiveness is usually measured by the number of terrorist attacks and casualties, quantity of infrastructure damage and success of kidnapping operation. The most common tactics used by terrorist groups are shootings, bombing, robbery, kidnapping and assassination (Marsden, 2014:134). Sharif (1996) contends that there is a high chance of tactical success if explosive devices were used over other tactics such as armed attack or hostage taking. Thus, the attainment of tactical objectives may result in the accomplishment of strategic goals.

Research has suggested that terrorist organisations generally achieve tactical goals such as securing public sympathy and provoking emotional over-reaction from the targeted state (Dershowitz 2002; Pape 2003). Suicide bombings is one of the most psychological effectual tactics due to its ability to pass the message that the attacker cannot be dissuaded. Pape (2003) opines that the continued use of suicide terrorism as a strategy is due to the awareness of its effectiveness. Suicide attacks have a high impact because they enable terrorists to kill a large number of people and instil fear at little cost. The Global Extremism Monitoring (2017) found that Boko Haram conducted 189 successful suicide attacks, which killed 449 people in 2017, while ISIS carried out 411 suicide assaults killing 2299 people in Iraq and Syria in the same year. The success of suicide terrorism is usually seen as a way of gaining martyrdom or heavenly blessings by the perpetrator. Thus, the attainment of operational success by terrorist organisations could represent a tactical victory.

Furthermore, terrorist groups might achieve tactical victory by securing publicity and attracting attention to their cause. Terrorism attempts to gain public attention and sympathy through the media. The 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda are a tactical success because they attracted worldwide publicity, generated attention and still instilled fear in the public. However, Hoffman (2006:184) argues that no evidence suggests that the media reportage of terrorist activities leads to an increase in the sympathy of the public to the cause of the terrorist. Instead of sympathising with their cause, the public ends up misinterpreting the motives of the terrorist group by inferring that their overwhelming aim is to destroy (Abrahms, 2006). Hoffman (2006:184) further states that terrorism has been more effective at spreading fear and gaining public attention than any other method of political struggle. A new development is the increasing use of social media by most terrorist organisations to relay their message to a larger number of people (Micheal, 2014:40). The use of modern technology by terrorists enhances their ability to instigate fear, thereby increasing their efficacy. For instance, ISIS used social media to further their goal of instilling fear and gaining publicity by releasing videos of executions and violent acts (Barr and Herfroy-Mischler, 2018:948). Thus, media coverage of terrorist violence could lead to further violent attacks, which might contribute to more tactical wins.

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Another tactical success that can be achieved by terrorist organisations is the obtainment of temporal concessions from the target government, which can be in terms of securing ransom payments for hostages or the release of prisoners. Boko Haram, which is well-known for raising funds through mass kidnapping, released over 100 kidnapped Dapchi schoolgirls to the Nigerian government after collecting a huge ransom in 2018 (Freeman, 2018). Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (2019) reported that Al-Qaeda received about \$75 million through payments of ransom between 2010 and 2015. Moreover, terrorist groups enter into negotiations with target governments for the release of their members in exchange for those kidnapped. For example, eighty-two kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls were released by Boko Haram in exchange for five of their leaders in 2017 (The Guardian, 2017). Therefore, the effectiveness of terrorist groups at securing funds and releasing their fighters is an indication that terrorism works at the tactical level.

## *Inherent Rewards*

English (2016) states that terrorism can also be successful in securing some inherent rewards for their members and supporters such as a sense of belonging, status, prestige, comradeship, empowerment and martyrdom. Intrinsic rewards are with respect to psychological and ideological satisfaction of members of terrorist organisations. Crenshaw (2001:405) argues that psychological elements such as thirst for excitement, desire for revenge and guilt, were the principal factors that drives individuals' interest in terrorism. Therefore, joining terrorist organisations could provide people, who might feel neglected, alone or powerless with a sense of community, identity and power. For instance, Akbar (2015) contends that some people joined the Islamic State because of their alienation from the democratic system of government. Kruglanski et al. (2015:559) further note that individuals who feel excluded, victimised and alienated are driven to restore their sense of self-worth by joining ISIS because they were convinced that the possibility of living the life of a "true Muslim" could only be achieved in the caliphate. Thus, the recruitments of new members can be a form of success for the terrorist group.

Terrorist organisations that are motivated by religious conviction see success in terms of heavenly reward. Houmanfar (2012:67) notes that some terrorist groups perceive death as a pathway to an eternal life of heavenly bliss, where they will enjoy the company of seventy-two virgins. Furthermore, Osama Bin Laden emphasised self-sacrifice when he formally declared war against the United States in 1996 by making his followers believe that the execution of suicide operations against infidels and apostates is the best way to wage jihad (Moghadam, 2008:46). Therefore, the death of a terrorist represents a victory for the group because it will allow the terrorist to gain heavenly reward even if they lose earthly battles. However, Chapman (2017) argues that taking inherent rewards as a form of terrorist victory is subjective because it would allow all terrorist organisations to be attributed to some form of success. Nevertheless, there is a need for the war against terrorism to consider inherent rewards so that the factor that attracts the perpetrators of terrorism can be weakened.

## **Conclusion**

The response to the question of whether terrorism works depends how the term "terrorism" is defined and what it means for it to "work." English's (2016) measurement of terrorists' success into strategic, partial strategic, tactical and inherent rewards helps to provide a comprehensive response to the debate on the effectiveness of terrorism by addressing the loopholes in existing studies. The terrorist organisations examined in this study achieved some degree of success in their partial strategic, tactical and inherent objectives, but they mostly failed to achieve their strategic goals. For instance, while Al-Qaeda was able to achieve a tactical victory of instilling fear and diverting public attention to their cause via the 9/11 attacks, they were unable to achieve their central goal of expelling the United States from the Middle East. Nevertheless, terrorism is effective in compelling policy change if "success" is seen as the attainment of partial success instead of the achievement of the stated central goals. This explains the reason for the continued use of terrorism even if it has resulted in overall strategic failure.

## **Tables and Figures**

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**Table 1: Effectiveness of Terrorist Groups Based on English (2016) Classification of Success**

Type of Success	Examples	ISIS	Al-Qaeda	Boko-Haram
Strategic	Creation of new states or full control of territory, the spread of ideology	Not achieved yet	Not achieved yet	Not achieved yet
Partial Strategic	Territorial control, revenge attacks, shift of attention to the demands and violence of terrorists	Achieved	Achieved	Achieved
Tactical	Undermining adversary, gaining publicity, operational and organisation success, obtaining political concession, instilling fear	Achieved	Achieved	Achieved
Inherent	Martyrdom, fame, power, comradeship, status, recruitment and prestige	Achieved	Achieved	Achieved

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