
Modelling Terrorism and Political Violence

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Abstract

This article introduces some conceptual thoughts to the study of terrorism and provides answers to questions such as: can terrorism be studied like other crime phenomena? What are the conceptual and methodological challenges when framing terrorism as crime or military conflict? What are the epistemological consequences of studying a highly politicized object? What makes terrorist violence different from other forms of political violence such as guerrilla warfare and insurgency? For this purpose, in the first part of the article a review will be conducted to ascertain what criminologists have contributed to the conception of terrorism. In the second part a model of terrorism is elaborated that depicts the crucial parameters of this form of political violence and thereby bypasses some of the existing conceptual difficulties and misconceptions. We learn from the various definitions of terrorism that the singularity of terrorism has something to do with the victim, the purpose and the consequences of violence. Specifically the fact that terrorists are as indifferent to the various targets as they are to the various political consequences of their attack is what distinguishes terrorism from related phenomena of political violence.

Keywords: armed conflict, civil war, definition of terrorism, guerrilla warfare, insurgency, low-intensity warfare, modern warfare, political violence, terrorist violence

Introduction¹

Researching a social phenomenon that is considered a menace to society creates a political climate within the research context where political requirements can interfere with scientific objectives. The discipline of criminology traditionally has to find the right balance between the two. This experience might be particularly helpful for studying terrorism – the embodiment of the social threat. Many criminologists have also been accused of apologizing for the unjustifiable, when they approach a unanimously condemned crime such as paedophilia, drug-trafficking or terrorism with a value-free approach instead of a problem-solving approach. Specifically the study of terrorism must disengage from a politicized and deadlocked view on the topic, which does not hide the fact that an analytical precise definition of the term terrorism may have no applicability for the prevention of terrorism. Such a definition is developed throughout this article by drawing on crucial conceptual contributions from criminology and terrorism studies.

One reason that accounts for the problems of defining terrorism is the constant attempt to see it as a mutually exclusive category of political violence. Apparently it is difficult to draw a line of distinction because definitions of terrorism usually – either



implicitly or explicitly – refer to the concepts of innocence and conflict involvement of the victim, e.g. by using the term civilian. Just as there are different degrees of innocence and conflict involvement, violence against innocent and uninvolved people is terrorism to a different degree. This is not to deny that such attacks are tragic to different degrees – they are tragic in any case – but for the purpose of an analytical definition moral assessments are obstructive. The innocence of the victims usually is contested because perpetrators, victims and third parties hold different views of how deeply they are involved in the conflict and to what degree they are responsible for the problem that motivates the terrorists. One man's innocent is another man's collaborator. Because innocence and responsibility are disputed, the concept of substitutability of the terrorist target (and purpose) might be the more objective definitional parameter for terrorist violence. Both parameters, *victim and purpose substitutability*, can therefore be used as adequate indicators to assess the degree of terrorism of any given act of political violence. *Deliberate physical violence against humans is terroristic to the degree to which different victims as well as different anticipated political consequences of the violent act are substitutes.* The term *substitute* is borrowed from economics and indicates two or more choices of goods that all equally satisfy the consumer's preferences.

The first part of this article shows conceptual differences between terrorism and more usual forms of delinquency as they are discussed in the criminological literature. These differences are summarised here as the *three anomalies of terrorism*. The article proceeds by pointing to an important similarity between studying crime and studying terrorism: the question of impartiality in the study of condemned behaviour. The last two sections then go on to depict two very different social facts that both fit the term terrorism. One is the discretionary/political usage of the term; the other is a particular type of political violence. This last part positions the category of terrorism on the continuum of political violence.

Three anomalies of terrorism

The discipline of criminology investigates social processes of 'law (rule) making, law breaking, and reactions to law breaking'.² Until the events of 9/11 criminologists were somewhat reluctant to study terrorism.³ Instead, this field was covered by political scientists and the terrorism studies community. Terrorism obviously involves acts of law-breaking and is prosecuted by law-enforcement institutions. It is thus rather surprising that the subject hardly found its way onto the criminology research agenda for a long time, while other unusual crime phenomena have been dealt with. This might be due to the fact that there are some conceptual difficulties that appear when one tries to frame terrorism as crime and delinquency. One problem is to determine what kind of criminal acts shall be considered terrorist crimes: only the violent act itself or the numerous 'terrorist oriented crimes'⁴ that are necessary to prepare for the attack, such as money-laundering, document fraud or weapon procurement? What about preparatory acts that are not criminal, such as travelling or flight training? But even if researchers limit the subject-matter to the very act of performing violence,

conceptual difficulties still arise. Indeed we have to admit from a criminological point of view that terrorism is an unusual form of delinquency. The crucial conceptual differences between ordinary crime and terrorism that are discussed in the literature can be understood by thinking of *three anomalies* of terrorism.

1. Terrorist violence is moralistic violence

Unlike the perpetrator of stereotypical crimes such as theft, vandalism, drug offences or tax fraud, terrorists are convinced that they are restoring justice, rather than breaking the law. Terrorism, for the terrorists, is not perceived as a crime but as the reaction to a crime.⁵ However, this seems to be the case for some other crimes too. For Donald Black many incidents of violent crime are unilateral forms of self-help, either to retaliate, settle a dispute or compensate for a previous crime when penal measures are absent or considered insufficient. Such crimes therefore are conceptualized as 'social control'⁶ and consequently can be explained through theories of social control rather than theories of delinquency. Yet there are two attributes that distinguish vigilantism as social control from terrorism as social control. Vigilantism and penal measures defend the otherwise same norm, whereby criminal sanctions imposed by state authorities replace individual righteousness as a reaction to norm violations. For the purposes of terrorism there is often no legal option because the terrorist's claims are usually at odds with conventional values. Criminal punishment is the (lawful) reaction to an unlawful act; vigilantism is the unlawful reaction to an unlawful act; and terrorism is the unlawful reaction to an act (or societal condition) whose lawfulness is contested and therefore cannot be addressed by law, which requires a high degree of social agreement. Donald Black's theoretical explanation of terrorism is about this very point: certain societal constellations make it likely that collectives resort to terrorism to enforce their values. Black calls this constellation the 'geometry of terrorism' where adversaries are:

physically close but socially distant ... The geometry of terrorism ... is not conducive to social control through law ... Thus, as a polarized structure of extremely distant adversaries attracts the quasi warfare of terrorism, so it attracts quasi-warfare against terrorism.⁷

It is important to understand that the political claims asserted through terrorism are not illegitimate per se. They are illegitimate from the point of view of the terrorist's adversary of course; otherwise terrorism would not be necessary to assert these goals. But terrorism is not characterized by the legitimacy or the illegitimacy of the political claim but by the modus operandi of the activists.

2. Terrorist violence is vicarious

The second difference between terrorism and vigilantism concerns the anonymous reciprocity of punishment and this is where the second anomaly comes into play. Unlike criminal punishment and vigilante justice, terrorist violence does not punish

the individual who is responsible for the perceived wrong. In fact it would be difficult to determine a responsible individual in the case of 'offences' such as capitalism, secularization or worldwide heresy. Rather, terrorism 'applies a standard of collective liability'.⁸ The actual addressee of terrorist violence is the state power, the society or, more vaguely, the collective of 'infidels', 'Zionists', or 'crusaders' in the case of jihadi terrorism. And just as terrorism is addressed to collectives, it is also committed by collectives, whereby the individual bomb-carrier is an agent of an ideology or constituency. Most occurrences of interpersonal violence can be categorized as being either moralistic or coercive, which means that the victim has either somehow provoked the aggression or is simply an opportune target that can be coerced to satisfy some non-moralistic desire (e.g. monetary or sexual) of the offender. For terrorist violence this dichotomy does not apply: 'As a form of violence, terrorism combines elements of predatory and moralistic violence ... Terrorism uses the means of predatory violence to accomplish the goal of moralistic violence.'⁹ Accordingly, the relation between the victim and the offender is vicarious on two accounts: the victim is held accountable for a grievance caused by collective action, and the offender retaliates an injustice on behalf of a diffuse constituency.

3. *Terrorist violence is not controlled by conventional criminal justice measures*

The third anomaly of terrorism is a consequence of its righteous nature and the political claims it shall promote. Terrorist violence is difficult to control even by the *ultima ratio* of state power: military violence and criminal investigation and punishment. This is because terrorism intentionally challenges the state's monopoly of force. Terrorism seems to be the *ultima ratio* of resistance to state power. Heinrich Popitz's¹⁰ paradox of power applies to the case of terrorism: the *ultima ratio* for the exercise of power – killing – is a resource that everyone can use. Specifically the power to kill is at the same time the prerequisite and the limitation of humans exercising power over humans.

Because terrorism is neither a genuine crime nor a form of genuine military aggression, the nation state employs a mix of measures for social control and conflict regulation in order to contain its occurrence: besides the 'war model', 'the criminal justice model' and the 'expanded criminal justice model',¹¹ the 'public health model'¹² and reconciliation and restorative justice¹³ have been introduced as a means of countering terrorism. Because this mix of measures seems to be insufficient, some states even make use of utilitarian instruments of power such as extraordinary renditions, targeted killings, or torture of terrorist suspects. Subtler changes in some domestic criminal justice systems have been described as demonstrating a 'preventive turn'¹⁴ in penal policy. It seems that for offences related to terrorism the state favours the imperative to prevent such crimes over the constitutional or human rights of potential offenders.¹⁵

Some authors argue that these difficulties make research on terrorism incompatible with criminological paradigms and therefore terrorism should not be studied as an occurrence of delinquency.¹⁶ While it seems reasonable that criminological theory alone cannot sufficiently explain terrorist violence, it is not convincing to exclude

it from criminological research for this reason alone. Theoretical and conceptual difficulties only indicate the necessity for criminology to cope with reality. After all, it is the reality which sharpens theory and not vice versa: 'If terrorism does not fit some theory, why blame terrorism, why not blame the theory.'¹⁷ Likewise, Sebastian Scheerer argues that the discipline must and can adapt to the ever-changing 'Sinnprovinz'¹⁸ of delinquency.

Challenges for impartial research on crime and terrorism

Besides conceptual anomalies, the study of terrorism and the study of crime also have some common ground. LaFree and Dugan have identified 10 similarities that are summarized in Table 1.¹⁹

From an epistemological point of view one important similarity is missing in this enumeration: for the study of terrorism as for the study of crime the researcher can choose whether he²⁰ takes a preventative or an impartial approach to the object of study. This is a classic dilemma in criminological research because the general expectation of politicians, funding agencies and the general public is that criminological research

Table 1 Similarities in the criminological study of terrorism versus common crime as discussed in Lafree and Dugan, 'How Does Studying Terrorism Compare to Studying Crime?'

Comparing the study of terrorism with the study of crime: similarities	
Conceptual	<p><i>Both terrorism and common crime:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are interdisciplinary • are both social constructs • are selectively prosecuted and thereby show the discrepancy between law in books and law in action • are disproportionately committed by young males^a • undermine social trust, when they appear on a sustain level 3
Methodological	<p><i>For the study of terrorism, as for the study of common crime, similar kinds of analysis are relevant:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • patterns, distributions and trends • geographic mapping • time series analysis • causal analysis • life course analysis
Data collection	<p>For common crime, a wealth of different empirical data exists (official records, victimization and self-report surveys). For terrorism there are mainly 'terrorism event' statistics (e.g. PGIS, ITERATE, RAND-MIPT,) and secondary data.</p>

^aSome of the differences which Lafree and Dugan (p. 56) label conceptual seem to be more empirical e.g. 'Terrorism, like common crime, is disproportionately committed by young males'.

should contribute to the solution of the crime problem. Although these expectations are admissible, the discipline is not predominantly responsible for the eradication of crime, but for providing a general picture about the causes and consequences of delinquency, and how human collectives deal with norm violations. According to these two sometimes competing expectations, criminological research can be divided into applied 'administrative criminology'²¹ and fundamental research. For research in terrorism the same division has been acknowledged.²²

The question about scientific impartiality deserves attention, because it has epistemological consequences. A highly politicized research topic such as terrorism tends to be approached with a high degree of political intent. Many researchers study the subject because the legislature or the executive is in need of a sound basis for counter-terrorism measures. This is reasonable, and certainly prevention studies are usually objective with regard to their respective research. But if the research community predominantly engages in the analysis of terrorism with the object of preventing it, then we will end up with a 'skewed research agenda'.²³ This is the case with 'the discipline of terrorology',²⁴ the 'terrorism industry',²⁵ and the 'propagandistic approach' to the study of terrorism,²⁶ a research field comparable to administrative criminology in which the research interest is stated by policy-makers who seek technical solutions for the prevention of crime and terrorism.²⁷

In a classic article entitled 'Whose Side Are We On?' the criminologist Howard Becker claims that the study of deviance always includes a hierarchy of morals, and that 'Many more studies are biased in the direction of the interests of responsible officials than the other way around.'²⁸ If one applies this statement to the context of terrorism research, one could only disagree insofar as probably *all* studies on terrorism show this bias.²⁹ According to Becker, one reason why this bias systemically occurs in the social sciences is that the moral hierarchy correlates with a 'hierarchy of credibility'. The researcher is more likely accused of being prejudiced the more he articulates the position of the 'underdog' in a moral hierarchy (which might be under-researched and therefore is of particular scientific interest), while studies articulating the opinion of the establishment remain unquestioned. Arguing from the point of view of the establishment is more credible than arguing from the point of view of the underdog. Experimental evidence from research in social psychology shows that the process of explaining possible reasons for doing harm can indeed 'produce a relatively condoning attitude toward perpetrators as a result of explaining their action'.³⁰ Further, the authors found that the explaining/condoning effect is perceived to be stronger by third parties than it actually is.³¹ Irrespective of the actual attitude of the scientist researching evil, third parties who read (or listen to) the scientist's explanation assume this condoning attitude.³²

The hierarchy of credibility is presumably stronger or weaker depending on the type of crime under consideration and the degree of its controversy. For terrorism, this hierarchy is imperative: 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists', President George W. Bush emphasised in an address to a joint session of Congress and the American people in 2001.³³ Apparently, for the research of terrorism the hierarchy of credibility is of high relevance:

In too many minds the only acceptable response to terrorism is revulsion and condemnation. Those who appear to respond differently – such as arguing for a balanced understanding ... – can all too easily be labelled as sympathisers, apologists and appeasers.³⁴

The criminologist Niggli accepted this fact and advocates the exclusion of terrorist violence from the criminological research agenda because the researcher either has to be loyal to the state, or would have to take a critical approach towards power: ‘If one feels one cannot do so, then there is only the conclusion that the phenomenon of terrorism is not, and cannot be, a “proper” topic in the field of criminology.’³⁵

This raises the question whether terrorism can be studied from the terrorists’ point of view at all without the researcher being considered a sympathizer and the results being ignored. The question ‘whose side are we on?’ can be a dilemma for the criminologist studying terrorism, especially when conducting field research.³⁶ The dilemma occurs whether the position of the terrorists is considered and articulated (rather than advocated) or not. The domain of terrorism studies and criminology lack works that articulate the views of the moral underdog (which might indeed be due to the hierarchy of credibility and the subsequent accusation of bias against those who articulate unconventional views).

So far we have looked at the world from the point of view of the civilian victims of terrorism, the security forces fighting terrorism, the millions of ordinary people who directly or indirectly witness terrorism, the politicians who legislate in order to try to control terrorism – from just about every angle, except the point of view of the terrorists.³⁷

But even Moghaddam’s book *From the Terrorists’ Point of View* seemingly cannot escape the preventive imperative. ‘Seeing the world from the terrorist point of view does not mean condoning terrorism; rather, it means better understanding terrorism so as to end it.’³⁸

Certainly counter-terrorism efforts should be evidence-based in order to facilitate their success, but political considerations can provide a weak basis for empirical research. For fundamental research there is always a *chance* of finding applicable results that alleviate problems or bring about progress, but there is no guarantee. Both approaches can provide objective, though different, results about the object under study as the following example of a physician and his patient shows:

The physician, after all, is not necessarily less objective because he has made a partisan commitment to his patient and against the germ. The physician’s objectivity is in some measure vouchsafed because he has committed himself to a specific value: health. It is this commitment that constrains him to see and say things about the patient’s condition that neither may want to know.³⁹

What are these things that the researcher does not see and say when employing a preventive approach to the study of terrorism?⁴⁰ One thing seems to be a sound analytical definition of terrorism, which will be discussed in the following part of this article. To sum up: research of contentious objects allows the researcher to take a position somewhere on the moral axis of condoning–condemning, as well as somewhere on the intentional axis of preventing–observing. There seems to be a drive for researchers to take a condemnatory–preventive approach.

Terrorism and its two meanings

This part of the article reviews contributions that successfully bypassed some of the epistemological problems associated with the preventive approach. Single conceptual elements within those contributions are selected and compiled into a sound analytical description of terrorism.

There are two different, but equally valuable, descriptive understandings of terrorism. The word does not only refer to an empirical phenomenon that can be directly observed (like gravity, for instance). The term can also be considered exclusively as a *discretionary label* with political utility. Political actors use the term terrorism not for descriptive purposes but for political ones, e.g. resorting to certain legal actions in order to remedy terrorism. Accordingly terrorism has two distinct realities: first it is a removable label used for political purposes and second it is a certain *modus operandi* of political violence. This article is primarily about the description of terrorism as a *modus operandi* of political violence. Nevertheless it seems important to understand that the term refers to two very different social entities. Therefore the meaning of terrorism as a political label is briefly discussed here.

Terrorism as political discretion

One way to look at terrorism is to understand it exclusively and consistently as a polemic construct, as in the following definition: terrorism is a label attached to subversive political action that marks the enemy's damnability (and thereby justify extraordinary measures to fight him).⁴¹ In this case, the empirical correlate of the term is a discursive construct, which reflects power interests. Because the monopoly of force is contested and challenged by terrorist activists, the political establishment uses its definitional power to label these claims and the violent methods to achieve them as illegitimate and evil. Lauderdale and Oliverio persuasively claim that, 'there is no consistent unity in the way terrorism has been defined or constructed throughout the ages'.⁴² It appears that throughout all kinds of political conflicts, revolutionary activism has been declared terrorist in a seemingly arbitrary manner.

By understanding terrorism explicitly as a polemic construct, the researcher can identify and examine patterns in the seemingly random attribution of the term to different kinds of revolutionary and subversive activism. For this approach it has to be accepted that the political practice of labelling actors as terrorists cannot be

evaluated as true or false but rather must be considered a performative utterance.⁴³ The researcher who chooses the labelling approach⁴⁴ to the study of terrorism asks questions such as: what kinds of social phenomena have been labelled terrorist, by whom and why, and with what consequences? Abstractly speaking, the researcher looks for the empirical correlate of a semantic construct (terrorism). This is somewhat unusual for social scientists (while not so for linguists or philosophers) because usually they observe a real-world phenomenon and then, *ex post*, try to define and typologize it through scientific language. In this case it is the usage of the term that decides which action is *de facto* terrorism and which is not. Apparently this is a field of research rarely found within prevention studies.

Terrorism as political violence

According to the second understanding of terrorism, the empirical correlate of the term is a certain *modus operandi* of political violence and social activism. The majority of the literature on the topic deals with this aspect of terrorism and the key question: which kind of political violence is terrorist and which is not?

The literature points to the importance of not confusing terrorism with the nature of the political claim a terrorist group might express. Terrorism is a method, a *modus operandi*, and not an ideology or worldview.⁴⁵ Terrorism pursues no goal; jihadists, nationalists, separatists, millenary sects, or right-wing activists employ terrorism as a means of enforcing their very different goals and worldviews. Louise Richardson clarifies this widespread misconception by stating:

This same confusion between ends and means is what has given the rather silly adage that 'one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist' such a long life. The adage just reinforces the point that we don't like to label people whose goals we share as terrorists.⁴⁶

A freedom fighter can still be a terrorist for the very same person. Terrorism is not primarily characterized by the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the political goals, but by the *modus operandi* in reaching those goals. This analytical assertion is not to deny that terrorist means are often employed by those who express claims conventionally perceived as illegitimate, but to point to the differences between political claim and political method.

The understanding of terrorism as a method makes the search for generalizing root causes questionable. Richardson explains the banality of terrorism: 'If there is one single explanation it is that terrorism is a tactic and people use it because they think that, at some level, it works.'⁴⁷ Terrorism seems to be too diverse a phenomenon for identifying single factors (such as poverty, failed states or social tensions) that have high explanatory power. It seems meaningful, however, to look for the root causes for specific conflicts in which terrorism occurs. At this level it is possible to study why certain groups think a terrorist tactic might be legitimate, necessary and successful for reaching their goal. On this basis general causes of terrorism can be looked for, but it may be that so-called terrorists have very little in common to explain their behaviour.

What kind of human violence constitutes terrorist violence? Two well-known studies have systematized parts of the vast body of literature containing definitions on terrorism, and thereby identified single 'definitional elements': Schmidt and Jongman have conducted a survey among experts in the terrorism studies community asking for their definition of terrorism.⁴⁸ Across 109 definitions the authors identified 22 definitional elements such as 'threat', 'psychological impact', 'publicity', 'randomness', 'civilian victims' and so on. In a follow-up study, Weinberg and colleagues compared these 22 definitional elements in a meta-analysis of 55 articles in academic journals containing definitions of terrorism to find a consensual definition. The authors conclude that the consensual definition⁴⁹ (containing those elements that at least 20 per cent of the authors use) is 'highly general'.⁵⁰ Likewise Silke notes: 'The various definitions reach from the absurdly overspecialized to the unacceptably over-general.'⁵¹ Since the consensual definition seems to be of little analytical use, it is reasonable to identify those definitional parameters that are crucial for gaining conceptual clarification. Particularly helpful in this regard are Richardson's 'seven crucial characteristics of the term terrorism'⁵² which state that terrorism is (1) politically inspired (2) violence⁵³ committed by (3) sub-state actors that seek to (4) communicate a message by selecting (5) symbolic and (6) civilian targets that are in principle (7) interchangeable. This definition acknowledges important characteristics of terrorism but is still problematic for two related reasons: first, it treats terrorism as a mutually exclusive category within the spectrum of political violence, where this exclusiveness can be questioned, and second, it uses an ambiguous definitional parameter: civilians.

Implicit in the definitional parameter 'civilians' are associations such as 'uninvolved', 'innocent' or 'neutral', all of which suggest civilian targets to be illegitimate targets. Accordingly, the definition remains controversial because *one man's civilian is another man's combatant* (or at least a supporter of the enemy). From an ethical point of view this distinction is not always as easy as one might suppose, especially in high-conflict environments. Quasi-military actors such as private contractors who are involved in combat cannot easily be regarded as civilians, although technically they might be. Non-combatant civilians who support or represent the enemy may be considered a legitimate target, not only for the perpetrators. So another simplistic answer to the fundamental question 'Why do people deliberately and violently attack innocent civilians?' might be 'Because the perpetrators don't think their victims are innocent civilians.'

Moreover, the distinction of a target as either civilian or military does not sufficiently discriminate terrorism from guerrilla tactics.⁵⁴ If we simply consider 'civilians' in the sense of international humanitarian law as anyone who is not wearing a military uniform, we cannot distinguish terrorism from insurgency or guerrilla tactics. In most asymmetric conflicts, non-military targets (such as police forces, judges, people engaged in transport, diplomats and other 'collaborators') are attacked.⁵⁵ 'Deliberately and violently targeting civilians for political purposes'⁵⁶ is not necessarily terrorism in a strict analytical sense. Guerrilla and terrorist tactics are similar in many ways and can only be distinguished gradually. In the reality of a conflict, they both appear side by side and their analytical distinction has no practical

value. The Taliban, for instance, when planning a military operation, presumably do not discuss in depth the question whether the operation should be an insurgent or terrorist attack. Nor are their victims concerned with this academic question.

It depends on additional criteria to decide whether an attack on civilians is considered a guerrilla or a terrorist attack. For most occurrences of political violence such as insurgency or guerrilla warfare, the target has some attributes that interfere with the interests and intentions of the group, and is killed *exactly for this reason*. The goals of a guerrilla attack cannot be reached by killing anyone else. An illustrative example is that of political assassination. The assassin and the constituency on whose behalf he acts anticipate an immediate political impact from the ad hoc killing. For terrorism there is no immediate utility that results from the target's death and the anticipated effect of the attack is usually much vaguer.

It appears that terrorists rarely have a very coherent idea of what kind of reaction they will get ... Terrorists appear more interested in the scale of the reaction than [in] the details. They can countenance opposite reactions, from capitulation to widespread repression, and be almost equally pleased.⁵⁷

This is Richardson's crucial observation. Because almost any consequence of the attack is welcomed it does not matter who is killed as long as the attack is massive and symbolic. Just as the purposes of terrorism are substitutable so are the victims. According to the rationale of terrorist groups every change from the political status quo is necessarily an improvement. The terrorist experiment seems to be about the grim curiosity 'let's see what happens if ...'⁵⁸

*The continuum of political violence*⁵⁹

What we learn from the various definitions of terrorism is that the singularity of terrorism has something to do with the victim, the purpose and the consequences of violence. Specifically, the fact that terrorists are as indifferent to the various targets as they are to the various political consequences of their attack is what distinguishes terrorism (even though only slightly) from related phenomena of political violence. Therefore it seems reasonable to regard the substitutability between different victims and different potential consequences as a decisive element of terrorist violence: *deliberate physical violence against humans is terrorist to the degree to which different victims as well as different anticipated political consequences of the violent act are substitutes*.

The term *substitute* is borrowed from economics and indicates two or more choices of goods that equally satisfy the consumer's preferences. This analogy appears to be cynical but unfortunately this is the logic of terrorism. The terrorists are as indifferent to the various targets as they are to the political consequences of their attack. One can introduce into the violence criteria further add-ons such as 'the serious attempt', 'the threat' or 'committed by sub-state actors' if these are considered helpful, but the decisive parameter is the degree to which potential victims and potential consequences are interchangeable so as to satisfy the attackers' preferences.

The concept of substitutability helps to discern different degrees of political violence; at one end of the continuum we find terrorism (for which the victim is perfectly substitutable) and at the other ad hoc military violence (for which the target is perfectly limited) (see Table 2). If the age, sex, religion, nationality, worldview or political function of the victim do not matter to the perpetrators, and neither does it matter what the potential political consequences of the attacks are as long as they are significant, then this is indeed the ideal type of terrorist attack. In less obvious cases it still may be justifiable to classify an incident as terrorist; as already mentioned, the different types of political violence are not mutually exclusive to each other. At the other end of the continuum we find ad hoc military operations for which the target is perfectly limited such as the targeted killing of a key organizational leader or assassinations of key political or military figures.

The four graphs in Figure 1 show the gradual transition from ad hoc military violence to optimal terrorist violence. The line indicates the degree of preference for various targets. For ad hoc military violence (1) operations are restricted to a clearly defined target (e.g. key personnel); for military-related violence (2) there is a wider cluster of preferable targets but there still is a clear-cut distinction between preferable and unfavourable targets, as can be seen by the steep increase and decrease of the curve. For proximate terrorist violence (3), such as insurgency and guerrilla warfare, the range of preferable targets and the target/non-target dichotomy begins to

Table 2 Continuum and characteristics of political violence

		Continuum of political violence:			
		←			→
		(4) Optimal terrorist violence	(3) Proximate terrorist violence	(2) Military- related violence	(1) Dedicated political and military violence
Degree of victim substitutability	Perfectly substitutable e.g. regarding nationality, political function, religion	Partially substitutable e.g. within certain social groups (religious groups, state officials, occupying forces)	Partially limited Small target groups determined by purpose	Partially limited Territorial control, decimation, military defeat, general deterrence	Perfectly limited Purposes determine the target
Degree of purpose substitutability	Perfectly substitutable Indifferent to various political consequences	Partially substitutable Vague objectives e.g. retaliation, demoralizing the enemy, mobilizing supporters and sympathizers	Partially limited Territorial control, decimation, military defeat, general deterrence	Partially limited Territorial control, decimation, military defeat, general deterrence	Perfectly limited Dedicated objectives e.g. ad hoc targeted killings, assassinations, incapacitation

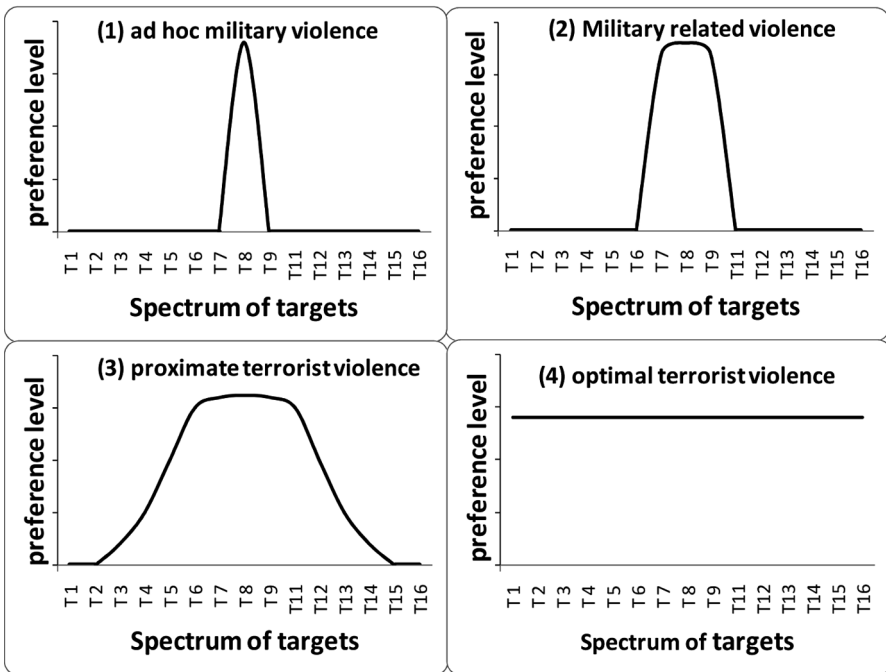


Figure 1 Transitions between four types of political violence⁶⁰

blur (smooth curve). As this trend continues we approach optimal terrorist violence (4) for which various targets are nearly perfectly substitutable.

It has been noted that unclear, undefined, or heterogeneous enemy hierarchies are “most often a sign of increasing radicalization and political isolation”⁶¹. While some isolated, radical groups abstain from political violence it seems that moral and operational isolation is a necessary condition for groups to consider a wide spectrum of potential military and non-military targets as equally preferable. And, as argued in this article, the more activists lose sight of what they actually want to achieve (that is, the more they are indifferent to the political consequences of an attack) the closer they come to what has been defined here as terrorism.

Although it is not possible to measure the degree of victim and purpose substitutability, it should at least be possible to rank both parameters on an ordinal level (that is, in terms of ‘more’ or ‘less’). When assessing two or more incidents of political violence it should be possible to locate them at certain sectors on the scale in Table 2. The more context information is available, e.g. about the identity of the victims, modus operandi of the attack, claims of responsibility, etc., the better an attack can be classified. Nevertheless, the conceptual clarity of the assessment is subjective to the degree to which one has to speculate about the anticipated consequences of the plotters.

Making the degree of victim and purpose substitutability the two defining parameters for terrorism allows us to consider military targets as targets of terrorism. If the target is nearly perfectly substitutable – that is, the purpose of the attack could expect to be reached through killing anyone else – then even a military target can be a terrorist target. Admittedly, military targets are seldom perfectly substitutable; at the very least they are attacked because a nation is involved in some conflict, but from a strategic point of view it makes a difference whether a bridgehead or military personnel in a non-conflict environment is attacked. According to the definition stated above, the 2008 Mumbai attacks are more terroristic than the foiled attacks of the German Sauerland cell against the US base in Ramstein.⁶² And the latter, in turn, can be considered more terroristic than an attack against military transports in Afghanistan. To cite another example, two hostage situations are more or less terroristic to the degree to which there are concrete (and realistic) demands, and to the degree to which the threat to hurt or kill the hostage is appropriately timed to influence somebody who is actually able to fulfil these demands. Demanding the withdrawal of US troops from the Middle East with a tourist held hostage appears to be more terroristic than demanding the release of certain prisoners using a high-ranking diplomatic hostage. As stated in the introduction, less terroristic does not mean less tragic.

Not only can single incidents of political violence be located on the continuum, but groups engaging in political violence can be rated according to their usual method of engagement. Using the proposed model for such an assessment, the Red Army Fraction (engaged most often in assassinations and kidnappings) would be rated as being less terroristic than al-Qaeda in Iraq (whose activists have a much broader target spectrum).

In principle, the model would allow for overly repressive and criminal violence by the state to be considered as terrorism. However, cases of state terrorism where the victims are perfectly interchangeable and the anticipated consequences are extremely vague may simply not occur. Repressive terror by the state usually appears to be much more purposeful than revolutionary terrorism. Moreover, regime-preserving violence is necessarily limited to potential subversives (who usually share a common citizenship). Likewise, when a state is at war with another state it directs its military violence against a limited set of targets. In any case state violence is directed against a more or less well-defined group and therefore cannot be considered terroristic within the scope of this model. Again, labelling inhumane state conduct as non-terroristic is not to deny the tragedy that various despotic regimes have caused in history. Sociologically it is just something different.

As well as the victim of the attack, it might be important to consider the environment and context in which the attack takes place. Whereas for terrorism the victim and the consequences are interchangeable, the place, the setting and the time are not. The ‘success’ of terrorism, if it comes to provoking a reaction, is a function of the number of victims and the place and modality of their death. Large numbers guarantee attention and reaction, but so do famous locations and unusually brutal *modus operandi*.

Summary

Terrorism shows three anomalies when compared with more common forms of crime and delinquency: first, terrorist violence is the reaction to a perceived injustice (at least this is claimed by the activists) facilitated through the 'moral outrage'⁶³ of individuals. Second, unlike usual forms of retaliative violence and vigilantism, terrorist violence targets individuals as substitutes for those who are directly responsible for the perceived wrong. Likewise, the perpetrator of a terrorist act might not have personally experienced any injustice, but acts on behalf of some constituency whose norms and morals have been violated. Accordingly, terrorist violence can occur in the paradoxical situation of someone whose norms and morals have not been directly violated killing an individual who has not violated anyone's norms and morals. Such a victim-offender configuration is difficult to find for other crimes. And, third, because terrorism is neither genuine crime nor genuine military aggression it appears as though the containment of terrorism does not follow the principles, paradigms and doctrines of conventional crime control and military intervention, but rather is addressed through a mix of both, as well as through means of negotiation and conciliation.

Just as terrorist violence defies control through classic intervention practices, terrorist violence defies description and explanation through classic theories of delinquency. It seems to be indispensable to incorporate theories into terrorism studies that explain how human collectives assert their values and respond to what they perceive as injustice. Still, the study of crime and the study of terrorism share some conceptual and methodological similarities, such as the researcher's dilemma of having to choose between a preventive and a critical/impartial approach to the object of study. Because the researcher is usually part of the establishment that is threatened by terrorism and crime, there is the general expectation of politicians, funding agencies and the general public that he contributes to the solution of the problem. Although evidence-based counter-terrorism is an important element of contemporary security policy (foreign and domestic), research should not be limited to preventive studies. Research free of political necessities is likely to produce results that enhance our understanding of why groups consider terrorist means to be legitimate, necessary and functional. There is a chance, but no guarantee, that such fundamental research will provide important insights into preventing terrorism.

Studying terrorism can mean two different things: first it can be about the question 'What different kinds of social phenomena have been labelled terrorist, by whom and why, and with what consequences?' and, second, it can enquire into the causes and consequences of terrorism as a *modus operandi* of political violence. Two crucial features characterize this particular kind of violence: terrorists are indifferent to their various targets and they are indifferent to the various political consequences of their attack. Terrorist activism, more than being precisely calculated action, is characterized by the drive 'to do something', and it has to be drastic. Various political, social and strategic consequences are equally preferred by the terrorists; this might be one reason why terrorism is sometimes considered to be 'not based on the logic of consequence and is thus irrational according to the [strategic] model'.⁶⁴

Indeed it seems to be necessary to identify the political preferences as officially claimed by the terrorists with unstated preferences on the social and psychological level that all account for the diversification of 'enemy hierarchies'.⁶⁵ Future research on terrorism has to identify subjective causes: that is, motivations for terrorist violence from the terrorists' point of view. Objective, measurable factors (e.g. poverty rates, corruption, repression, occupation, social alienation, moral disparities) do not deterministically lead to political violence, but are cognitively processed by social actors who may or may not find violent activism an appropriate reaction to the grievance.

Notes

- 1 I thank my colleagues Christopher Murphy and Carolijn Terwindt for their valuable comments on this article.
- 2 Edwin Sutherland, *Principles of Criminology* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1934), p. 3.
- 3 There are exceptions to this trend: for instance, see H. Hess, 'Terrorismus Und Terrorismus-Diskurs', *Kriminologisches Journal*, 15(2), 1983, pp. 98–109; Fritz Sack and Heinz Steinert, *Protest und Reaktion* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1984).
- 4 Mark S. Hamm, *Terrorism as Crime: From Oklahoma City to al-Qaeda and Beyond* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 10.
- 5 As argued, for instance, by Donald Black, 'Terrorism as Social Control', in Mathieu Deflem (ed.), *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Criminological Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004), pp. 9–18.
- 6 Donald Black, 'Crime as Social Control', *American Sociological Review*, 48(1), 1983, pp. 34–45.
- 7 Black, 'Terrorism as Social Control', pp. 13f.
- 8 Black, 'Terrorism as Social Control', p. 10.
- 9 Richard Rosenfeld, 'Terrorism and Criminology', in Deflem, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*, pp. 19ff.
- 10 Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1992), p.60.
- 11 Ami Pedahzur and Magnus Ranstorp, 'A Tertiary Model for Countering Terrorism in Liberal Democracies: The Case of Israel', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 13(2), 2001, pp. 1–26.
- 12 John Braithwaite, 'Pre-Emptying Terrorism', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 17(1), 2005, pp. 97–114.
- 13 Peter C. Sederberg, 'Conciliation as Counter-Terrorist Strategy', *Journal of Peace Research*, 32(3), 1995, pp. 295–312.
- 14 For instance, see David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 15 Michael Walzer, 'On Fighting Terrorism Justly', *International Relations* 21(4), 2007, pp. 480–4.
- 16 Marcel A. Niggli, 'Terrorismus als Thema der Kriminologie', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Kriminologie*, 1(1) 2002, pp. 25–6.
- 17 Richard Rosenfeld, 'Why Criminologists Should Study Terrorism', *The Criminologist*, 27(6), 2002, p. 3.
- 18 Translated as 'realm': Sebastian Scheerer, 'Nachteil und Nutzen Kritischer Kriminologie in Zeiten des Terrorismus', *Kriminologisches Journal*, 34(1), 2002, p. 37.
- 19 Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan, 'How Does Studying Terrorism Compare to Studying Crime?', in Deflem, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*, pp. 53–73.
- 20 In this article no gender-neutral language is used. Whenever applicable, both genders are referred to.
- 21 See Jock Young, 'The Failure of Criminology', in R. Young and J. Mathews (eds), *Confronting Crime* (London: Sage, 1986), pp. 4–30; and Jock Young, 'Radical Criminology in Britain: The Emergence of a Competing Paradigm', *British Journal of Criminology*, 28(2), 1988, pp. 159–83.
- 22 For instance, Andrew Silke, 'An Introduction to Terrorism Research', in Andrew Silke (ed.), *Research on Terrorism* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 15f; and: Noam Chomsky, 'International Terrorism: Image and Reality', in Alexander George (ed.), *Western State Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 23 Peter R. Neumann and M. L. R. Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism: How It Works, and Why It Fails* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 3.

- 24 Alexander George, 'The Discipline of Terrorism', in George, *Western State Terrorism*, pp. 76–101.
- 25 Edward S. Herman and Gerry O'Sullivan, *The Terrorism Industry: The Experts and Institutions that Shape our View of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).
- 26 Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New: International Terrorism in the Real World* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), p. 119.
- 27 Epistemological shortcomings in administrative criminology are described by Young, 'Radical Criminology in Britain', p. 176, as follows: 'It is the inability of administrative criminology to deal with the moral and political basis of crime which is its most fundamental flaw.' Another problem with state-sponsored research is the possibility that results might be withheld or smoothed over in the final report if it exposes flaws that the commissioning agency is responsible for. Many people who have written a public report for a political institution can testify to such political pressure.
- 28 Howard S. Becker, 'Whose Side Are We On?', *Social Problems*, 14(3), 1967, p. 242.
- 29 Becker, 'Whose Side Are We On?', gives the example of an under-researched field in criminology: 'Most research on youth, after all, is clearly designed to find out why youths are so troublesome for adults, rather than asking the equally interesting sociologically question: Why do adults make so much trouble for youth?' Applied to the research on terrorism one may wonder about the absence of studies that investigate the 'root causes of counter-terrorism'. After all, both concepts – terrorism and counter-terrorism – belong to the same analytical category. Of course, the absence of such research is due to the fact that counter-terrorism is usually not perceived as a problem but as the solution to a problem. After all, terrorism is nothing more than the alleged solution to a perceived problem.
- 30 Arthur G. Miller, Anne K. Gordon and Amy M. Buddie, 'Accounting for Evil and Cruelty: Is to Explain to Condone?' *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3(3), 1999, p. 254.
- 31 Miller et al., 'Accounting for Evil and Cruelty', p. 261.
- 32 Miller et al., 'Accounting for Evil and Cruelty', p. 266.
- 33 George W. Bush, address to a joint session of Congress and the American people, 20 September 2001. Available at: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.
- 34 Silke, 'An Introduction', p. 21.
- 35 Niggli, 'Terrorismus als Thema der Kriminologie', p. 26, my translation.
- 36 For instance, see Joseba Zulaika, 'The Anthropologist as Terrorist', in Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. Robben (eds), *Fieldwork under Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 206–22.
- 37 Fathali M. Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006) p. IV.
- 38 Moghaddam, *From the Terrorists' Point of View*.
- 39 Alvin Gouldner, 'The Sociologist as Partisan: Sociology and the Welfare State', *American Sociologist*, 3(1), 1968, p. 113.
- 40 Jeroen Gunning, 'A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?', *Government and Opposition*, 42(3), 2007, pp. 363–93. Gunning discusses the following shortcomings 'Ranging from lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical sterility to political bias and a continuing dearth of primary research data' (p. 363).

However, while 'traditional terrorism research' has produced some solid exploratory and descriptive knowledge, and, within the limits of an un-problematized status quo, explanatory knowledge, the shortcomings of this research – from over-reliance on secondary data rather than fieldwork, to uncritical adoption of state accounts, and lack of imagination regarding alternative solutions – are unlikely to be adequately addressed from within a purely 'problem-solving' paradigm. (p. 376)

- 41 Likewise Sebastian Scheerer mentions the discretionary character of the term terrorism: 'Terrorism, after all, is also a label with which many things can be marked.' Sebastian Scheerer, *Die Zukunft des Terrorismus* (Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 2002), p. 18, my translation.
- 42 Pat Lauderdale and Annamaria Oliverio, 'Terrorism as Deviance or Social Control', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 46(1–2), 2005, p. 166.
- 43 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
- 44 The labelling approach in criminology derives from the observation that norm violations elicit highly selective reactions (both formal and informal). 'The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied: deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.' Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 9.
- 45 For instance, see Scheerer, 'Nachteil und Nutzen', p. 39.

- 46 Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: John Murray, 2006), p. 26.
- 47 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 59.
- 48 Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988).
- 49 The consensus definition is: 'Terrorism is a politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role.' Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, 'The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16(4), 2004, p. 786.
- 50 Weinberg et al., 'The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism', p. 787.
- 51 Silke, 'An Introduction', p. 3.
- 52 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, pp. 20ff.
- 53 Notwithstanding the very different notions of violence in the social sciences, here violence basically refers to interpersonal physical harm deliberately inflicted.
- 54 This distinction is not to contradict M. L. R. Smith, 'Guerrillas in the Mist: Reassessing Strategy and Low Intensity Warfare', *Review of International Studies*, 29(1), 2003, pp. 19–37. In this article Smith insists that insurgency, guerrilla activity, terrorism and low-intensity warfare are not separate forms of warfare, but different manifestations of violent political conflicts within the spectrum of Clausewitz's conception of war. Bearing in mind the generality of Clausewitz's definition ('war is a continuation of politics by other means'), one cannot but agree with Smith. (See Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege: Erster Teil* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1832), p. 24, my translation.) Neither can one disagree that there are very different manifestations of political violence for which different meaningful categories can be built.
- 55 For Schneckener guerrilla fighters target affiliates of the adversary power (whether or not they are combatants) for tactical reasons, while terrorists seek psychological effects:

Notwithstanding, most rebel movements tend to extend the term combatant beyond its meaning in international law to all representatives of the power apparatus (politicians, policemen or judges). For terrorists, the assassination of civilians is a daily business, because it is only thereby that the desired psychological effects are reached.

Ulrich Schneckener, *Netzwerke des Terrors: Charakter und Strukturen des transnationalen Terrorismus* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2002), p. 13, my translation. Available at: www.swp-berlin.org/common/get_document.php?asset_id=177.

- 56 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, p. 20.
- 57 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, pp. 128 and 131.
- 58 Certainly terrorism also serves some concrete purposes such as 'revenge and renown' (as discussed by Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, pp. 95ff). But if we look for some unique characteristics of terrorism in order to distinguish it from related instances of political violence the substitute criterion is notable.
- 59 Continuums of political violence are not new to the study of terrorism. However, the existing contributions do not allow for the consideration of the possible consequences of political violence as substitutes for each other, and as such lack the criterion of indifference that is introduced in this article. Sánchez-Cuenca, for instance, refers to a continuum of political violence previously introduced by Schelling. According to him, terrorist violence pursues one of two purposes: either to force the state into an intended reaction or to demonstrate the state's weakness. The model explained in this article describes terrorist violence as indifferent to these and other consequences. Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, 'Terrorism as War of Attrition: ETA and the IRA', working paper (Madrid: Juan March Institute, 2004), pp. 3–10, and Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966). For a 'spectrum of political violence' see Richard Clutterbuck, *Terrorism and Guerrilla Warfare* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 5–17.
- 60 The graph is for illustrative purposes only and is not intended to suggest that arithmetic operations are possible. The x-axis shows the spectrum of various potential targets ($t_1, t_2 \dots t_n$ are groups with some common characteristics regarding function or social attributes – e.g. combatants, those engaged in transport, diplomats – ethnic, religious or national affiliation and so on). These classes are neither mutually exclusive nor can they be ranked other than in terms of preference for their selection as targets. The y-axis shows the corresponding levels of preference the attacker has for different potential targets.

- 61 Thomas Hegghammer suggests a hypothesis that is in line with the argument of this article: some years after the Afghan–Soviet war the jihadi movement divided into those groups who wanted to fight the ‘far enemy’ (Western states supportive of despotic Muslim regimes) and those who wanted to fight the ‘near enemy’ (despotic Muslim regimes). Hegghammer observes the recent trend of ‘ideological hybridization of jihadi groups’, which he interprets as a sign of weakness: ‘When enemy hierarchies become unclear, unidentified, or heterogeneous, then this is most often a sign of increasing radicalization and political isolation.’ Thomas Hegghammer, ‘The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups’, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 9(1), 2009, pp. 26f.
- 62 Daniel Schneider, one of the suspects of the terrorist cell, explained the purposes of placing a car bomb in front of the command building during a court session as follows: ‘They wanted to raise awareness for the active US military presence in Germany ... “The victims would not have played a decisive role for me”, Schneider said, but he was aware that such an attack would bring about victims’. ‘Prozess gegen die “Sauerland-Gruppe”: Anschlag auf Ramstein sollte Zeichen setzen’ (editorial), *Westdeutsche Zeitung* online, 15 September 2009, my translation. Available at: www.wz-newsline.de/?redid=630040.
- 63 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 72.
- 64 Max Abrahams, ‘What Terrorists Really Want’, *International Security*, 32(4), 2009, p. 82.
- 65 Hegghammer, ‘The Ideological Hybridization’, p. 26.