'Old' vs. 'New' Terrorism: What's in a Name?

Andreas GOFAS

Lecturer, Panteion University of Athens, Department of
International & European Studies

'Old' vs. 'New' Terrorism: What's in a Name?

Andreas GOFAS[*]

ABSTRACT

The question of "old" versus "new" terrorism has been debated vigorously. Proponents of "new terrorism" point to a radical transformation in the character of terrorism, while skeptics point out that today's terrorism is not a fundamentally or qualitatively new phenomenon but grounded in an evolving historical context. In this paper I take stoke of the debate by means of juxtaposing ideal types of "traditional" and "new" terrorism along the axis of five distinguishing variables: organizational structure; operational range; motives; tactics; and attitude towards the Westphalian system. The analysis reveals several similarities, instead of rigid distinctions, that point in favour of evolution rather the revolution of terrorist activity. Article, thus, question both the analytical value and empirical veracity of "new terrorism".

Keywords: Old Terrorism, New Terrorism, Evolution and Revolution of Terrorist Activity

'Eski' Terörizm 'Yeni' Terörizme Karşı: İsim Ne İfade Ediyor?

ÖZET

"Eski" ve "Yeni" terörizm konuları dinamik bir biçimde tartışılmaktadır. "Yeni terörizm" taraftarları terörizmin doğasında yaşanan radikal dönüşüme işaret ederken, kuşkucular günümüzdeki terörizmin temel ya da niteliksel açıdan yeni bir kavram olmadığını, temellerinin evrilmekte olan tarihsel bağlamda yattığını ileri sürmektedirler. Bu çalışmada, "geleneksel" ve "yeni" terörizmin ideal tipleri, beş temel ayırt edici değişken ekseninde, yan yana konulmakta ve konuyla ilgili süre giden tartışmanın canlandırılması hedeflenmektedir. Bahse konu olan değişkenler; kurumsal yapı, işlevsel alan, güdüler, taktikler ve Vestfalya sistemine yönelik tutumlardır. Yapılan analiz, terörist faaliyetin dönüşümünde rol oynayan katı farklılıklardan ziyade devrim yerine evrime işaret eden çeşitli benzerlikleri açığa çıkartmaktadır. Sonuçta, yeni terörizmin analitik değeri ve gözleme dayalı doğruluğu sorgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eski Terörizm, Yeni Terörizm, Terörist Faaliyetin Evrim ve Devrimi

* Marie Curie Fellow, Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, UK; Lecturer in International-al Relations, Department of International & European Studies, Panteion University of Athens, Greece. E-mail: a.gofas@ymail.com.

Introduction

The concept of "new terrorism" was coined in the academy in the 1990s.[1] However, it was after 9/11 that the idea of a "new" and radically altered form of terrorist threat gained widespread purchase beyond academia and spilled over to policy circles.[2] In the wake of the unprecedented atrocities of 9/11, and the extreme perceptions they inevitably provoked, the notion soon became part of the prevailing popular conventional wisdom and of the global collective political imaginary. Since then, the question of "old" versus "new" terrorism has been debated vigorously. Proponents point to a radical transformation in the character of terrorism, which, compared to "traditional" terrorism is structured in loose networks, instead of organizational hierarchies; is transnational, rather than localized, in its reach; deliberately targeted at innocent civilians; motivated by religious fanaticism, rather political ideology; and aimed at causing maximum destruction. So revolutionary is the transformation and so sharp the distinction with the "old" terrorism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, that the threat of "new" terrorism is calling us "to construct new frameworks for thought and analysis".[3] Skeptics, on the other, point out that accounts of "new" terrorism are indicative of the amnesiac state of post 9/11 debate on terrorism and that "[t]oday's terrorism is not a fundamentally or qualitatively "new" phenomenon but grounded in an evolving historical context".[4]

So, what are we to make of this and other exchanges like it? What's in a debate over a name/label? That is, "does it really matter what the kind of terrorism perpetrated by groups such as al-Qaeda is called?"[5] We wish to maintain that this is certainly not an exercise in semantics where the bone of contention is, to use Cronin's witty phrasing, to figure out whether al-Qaeda is the IRA with long beards or the Red Brigades with suicide belts.[6] It is neither a benign methodological debate where according to Neumann, who has arguably produced one of the most thorough and balanced accounts on the subject,

---

[1] See, for example, Walter Laquer, *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999. See also Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998; Ian O. Lesser, *Countering the New Terrorism*, Santa Monica CA, RAND Corporation, 1999.

[2] Apart from the label "new" terrorism, other, more apocalyptic, terms were also deployed so as to illustrate the radical change in both the character and threat of terrorism. Terms such as "*postmodern* terrorism" (Walter Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1996, p.24-36), "*catastrophic* terrorism" (Ashton Carter, John Deutch, *et.al.*, "Catastrophic Terrorism", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1998, p.80-94), and "*superterrorism*" (Glen Scheweitzer, *Superterrorism: Assassins, Mobsters, and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, New York, Plenum Trade, 1998). The article adopts the term "new" terrorism, since this is the one that prevailed in the literature, especially after 9/11.

[3] Charles W. Kegley, "The Characteristics, Causes, and Controls of the New Global Terrorism", Charles W. Kegley (Ed.), *The New Global Terrorism*, New York, Prentice Hall, 2003, p.4.

[4] Martha Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism," Ibrahim A. Karawan, *et.al.* (Eds.), *Values and Violence: Intangible Aspects of Terrorism*, Springer Science+Business Media B.V, 2008, p.120. For a lucid account of how and what e can learn from our historical experience with terrorism, see Richard English, *Terrorism: How to Respond*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

[5] Alexander Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda is not so new", Stuart Gottlieb (ed.), *Debating Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Washington D.C., CQ Press, 2010, p.15.

[6] Audrey Kurth Cronin, "What is Really Changing? Change and Continuity in Global Terrorism", Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds.), *The Changing Character of War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p.134.

"new terrorism is best understood as a methodology through which to systematize the process of evolutionary change".[7] Rather, the stakes are high in the ongoing debate at both the conceptual and policy level.

At the policy level, it needs to be stressed that labels, words, frames, and the ideas that inform them, matter a great deal by means of having both a constitutive and causal effect on political phenomena and choices.[8] In effect, "calling a problem "new" forces one to automatically buy into the belief that the appropriate solutions must also be new".[9] Indeed, the concept of "new" terrorism, which was until 9/11 a matter of academic deliberation, provided immediately a ready-made, and rather simple-minded, master narrative for a new framework of thought and policy prescription that moved the threat of terrorism to the core of the security agenda on both sides of the Atlantic. George W. Bush spoke of "new realities and dangers posed by modern terrorists"[10], while Tony Blair alerted us to a "new global terrorism" that "was driven not by a set of negotiable political demands, but by religious fanaticism".[11] Crenshaw captures neatly this travel of ideas from academy to policy-making, and associated process of securitization of the terrorist threat, by pointing out that defining religious, jihadist terrorism as "new" is an effective way of framing the threat so as to mobilize both public and elite support for major policy change.[12]

At the conceptual level, the notion of a radical transformation of terrorist activity is risking to jettison our past knowledge as accumulated by our experience with the "old". In so doing, it reinforces a post-9/11 "amnesiac debate on the subject"[13] and a dominant "presentism", when what is necessary is "a more historically grounded understanding of terrorism"[14]. A further corollary of adopting a rigid distinction between "old" and "new" terrorism, is that it impedes on our ability to develop a general, structural theory of terrorism, the lack of which characterizes, if not bedevils, the current state of the field. I am not suggesting here that we need not be sensitive to the local, political, and historical context of each group or type of terrorism. Richard English is right to point out that "our explanation of terrorism must also involve regional and historical disaggregation"[15] and that "the crude lumping together of terrorists as a uniform and single global enemy or problem is very unhelpful and misleading".[16] Rather, I am suggesting that while being sensitive to context and variation, we also need to be sensitive to that fact that, if we are to develop a

---

[7] Peter R. Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009, p.152.

[8]   Andreas Gofas and Colin Hay, "Varieties of Ideational Explanation", Andreas Gofas and Colin Hay (eds.), *The Role of Ideas in Political Analysis*, London, Routledge, 2010.

[9] Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda" p.15.

[10] Bush, 2001, quoted in Antony Field, "The 'New Terrorism': Revolution or Evolution?", *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2009, p.195.

[11] Blair, 2004, quoted in Field, "The 'New Terrorism'", p.195-6.

[12]   Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.133.

[13] English, *Terrorism*, p.57.

[14] Colin Wight, 'Theorising Terrorism: The State, Structure, and History', *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No.1, 2009, p.100. See also, Audrey Kurth Cronin, 'How Al-Qaeda Ends', *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2006, p.7-8.

[15] English, *Terrorism*, p.53.

[16]   Ibid., p.54

general theory of terrorism, we need to acknowledge that processes of causation are not "at the mercy of socio-political contingency or random individual choices".[17] In the case of the debate under examination, this means that while we should not lump together "old" and "new" terrorism, we should also avoid drawing quickly a rigid distinction between the two. So, "[t]he point is not that there has been no change in terrorism over the past century but that the changes that have occurred need to be precisely delineated."[18]

"Just the facts, Ma'am": A Note on the Approach

Louise Antony begins her contribution on the Socialization of Epistemology by reminding us the popular, back in the 1950 and 1960s, TV cop show called Dragnet.[19] The main character in the show was the LA Police Sgt. Joe Friday whose most popular line was "Just the facts, Ma'am"; a line with which he would interrupt every witness venturing a personal opinion about the case under investigation. As Antony argues, "the figure of Joe Friday gave pretty adequate expression to a popular conception of *objectivity* –one that is still popular today. The notion is that a good investigator –whether scientist, historian, journalist, or everyday citizen- will do as Sgt. Friday did, and discipline herself to consider *just the facts*".[20] I will agree with Antony that this type of "*Dragnet Objectivity*" is epistemologically flawed, but I will not agree that its pursuit (even in this epistemologically flawed fashion) is still dominant, at least in popular attempts at understanding terrorism.

Dragnet Objectivity is an inappropriate ideal for the study of terrorism, as terrorism "is no mere empirical fact that simply requires appropriate observation and cataloguing of its process and modes of operation. As a social fact terrorism is constituted, in part, by the beliefs of the actors engaged in the complex web of that practice".[21] The Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) intervention has made this point forcefully and convincingly, thus sensitizing us to the analytical necessity of not approaching terrorism as a brute fact that is time and context invariant.[22] But although discursive practices and everyday understandings of terrorism are essential to any social scientific account of terrorism, they cannot and should not set the limits of our understanding of the phenomenon.[23] It is for this reason that Joseph argues that "at some point we must break out of the idea of terrorism as a constitutive discourse to say something about what it is that is being constituted".[24]

---

[17] Konstantinos Drakos and Andreas Gofas, "In Search of the Average Transnational Terrorist Attack Venue", *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2006, p.75.

[18] Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.120.

[19] Louise Antony, "The Socialization of Epistemology', Robet E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p.58-77.

[20] Antony, "The Socialization of Epistemology", p.58.

[21] Wight, "Theorising Terrorism", p.100.

[22] On the CTS research agenda see, for example, Jeroen Gunning, "A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies", *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2007, p.363–93; Richard Jackson, Marie Breen-Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning (Eds.), *Critical Terrorism Studies*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2009; Richard Jackson *et.al.*, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*.

[23] Wight, "Theorising Terrorism", p.100

[24] Jonathan Joseph, "Critical of What? Terrorism and its Study", *International Relations*, Vol.23, No.1, 2009, p.93.

So, apart from the prevailing discourse we should also concentrate on the extra discursive properties of terrorism and consider *just the facts*, as Sgt. Friday would. But is this actually what current attempts at understanding terrorism concentrate on? The answer is in the negative. Al-Qaeda has colonized our collective political imaginary to such an extent that all post-9/11 understandings of terrorism are offered through the prism of its advent. Yet, to draw general conclusions on the basis of high profile cases, even spectacular ones like that of al-Qaeda, is to commit the most cardinal of methodological sins, namely selection bias. Put differently, and as Laqueur rightly reminds us, "the student of terrorism has to consider the general picture; any fixation on one specific aspect [or case] of terrorism is bound to lead to wrong conclusions".[25] It is our fixation with al-Qaeda that forces us to reduce contemporary terrorism to its religious manifestation and does not allow us to concentrate on the picture that emerges by looking at the universe of terrorist activity. The above remarks characterize our approach on the debate of "old" versus "new" terrorism to which we now turn.

Juxtaposing "Old" and "New" Terrorism

Having established both the importance of the issue of labeling and the importance of being attentive to what the evidence, rather than prevailing rhetoric, illustrate we can now turn to an examination of the analytical value of the "old" versus "new" terrorism divide by means of juxtaposing ideal types of each.[26] In order to evaluate whether "new" terrorism is as novel and unique as conventional wisdom holds, we will invoke five main variables, namely organizational structure; operational range; motives; tactics; and attitude towards the Westphalian system, that will allow us to construct ideal types of "old" and "new" terrorism. The resulting picture is captured in the terms of table 1.[27]

Table 1: *"Old" vs. "New" Terrorism (Ideal Types)*

	"Old" Terrorism	**"New" Terrorism**
Organizational Structure	Hierarchical	Networked
Operational Range	Within home region (territorial orientation)	Outside home region (transnational orientation)
Motives	Political/Nationalist Ideology	Religious Fanaticism
Tactics	Restrained Violence	Extreme Violence
Attitude towards Westphalian System	System-Affirming	System-Threatening

---

[25] Walter Laqueur, *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, New York, Continuum, 2003, p.8.

[26] This section draws and expands on parts of Andreas Gofas, "The Terrorism-Democracy Nexus and the Tradeoff between Security and Civil Liberties", Nikolaos Tzifakis (Ed.), *International Politics in Times of Change*, Heidelberg, Springer, 2012.

[27] The table draws inspiration from similar ones developed in Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*, p.29, from which the methodology of juxtaposing ideal types is followed; and Rohan Gunaratna, "Al-Qaeda is an example of a "new terrorism"", Stuart Gottlieb (Ed.), *Debating Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Washington D.C., CQ Press, 2010, p.18.

In constructing these ideal types, we replicate the stark distinction drawn in the existing literature between "old" and "new" terrorism –considering each separately. Yet it is important to emphasise that, in so doing, we are by no means committing ourselves to such a dichotomisation of past and present terrorist activity. Indeed, in the remainder of this paper, we reject precisely such a rigid distinction, by questioning the analytical value of "new" terrorism and by arguing that there is significant continuity of well-established terrorist practices and behaviours, rather than a revolutionary change.[28] It is to this matter that we now turn our focus on by briefly examining the five variables listed in the left column of table 1 in the order they appear.

Organizational Structure

According to advocates of the "new" terrorism thesis, one of the differences between "old" and "new" terrorism is to be found in their form of organization with traditional groups having a hierarchical structure and "new" groups having the structure of a loose network. According to Paul Wilkinson: "Unlike 'traditional' terrorism the New Terrorism is more diffuse and amorphous, using an international network of loosely connected cells and support networks rather than the traditional hierarchical command and control structure of a group based in a country or region".[29]

There is no doubt that the emphasis on the alleged organizational differences between traditional and "new" groups has been spurred by the rise of al-Qaeda, which "has frequently been described as a 'franchise' organization, which unites -and provides a global frame for- a variety of local campaigns".[30] Yet, despite this popular image, things are more complex. As Neumann notes, there are at least three competing images of al-Qaeda's structure[31]: the "spider web" image according to which al-Qaeda has actually a hierarchical structure with Osama bin Laden at the centre of command; the "franchise" image, according to which al-Qaeda instead of being directly involved in terrorist acts it sponsors them by means of subcontracting them to local groups who act on its behalf; and the "social movement" image according to which al-Qaeda is not to be understood as a coherent autonomous organization but rather as a broad ideological umbrella that inspires various local groups that do not have any necessary direct associations.

[28] For a similar line of argumentation in favor of evolution, rather than revolution, see also Field, "The 'New Terrorism'"; Crenshaw, *The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism*; Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda is not so new"; David Tucker, "What is New about the New Terrorism and How Dangerous is It?", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.13, No.3, 2001; Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "How New is the New Terrorism?", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 5, 2004. For a critique see Ersun N. Kurtulus, "The "New Terrorism" and its Critics", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 34, 2011, p.476-500, while for a balanced defense of the notion of 'new' terrorism, see Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*.

[29] Wilkinson, quoted in Field, "The 'New Terrorism'", p.198.

[30] Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*, p.73.

[31] Ibid., p.39-41. It should be noted that although these images have been portrayed in the literature as competing, Neumann considers them as complimentary with each one containing a kernel of truth.

As the above indicate, the exact structure of al-Qaeda, who has been portrayed as the canonical case of "new terrorism", is still much debated and hard to pin down. Moreover, critics of the "new terrorism" thesis argue that the organizational differences have been overplayed and exaggerated, as the presence of network structures can also be found in traditional groups whose organization "was not always as tight and hierarchical as it might now appear".[32] Field summarizes neatly the argument in the following way:

> Although "traditional" terrorist groups may have appeared to adopt formal hierarchical structures, the chain of command was frequently bypassed, meaning that in practice they often operated as a less organised network of militants. Indeed, some "traditional" groups actively encouraged a networked organisational structure for both strategic and practical reasons…. For example, the Provisional IRA and Fatah often delegated significant autonomy to individual terrorist cells and their operations were frequently planned and conducted without prior approval from the leadership.[33]

The same goes, to bring just one more example, for the Red Army Faction whose "apparently monolithic quality…was a myth"[34], as it resembled more of a "loose confederation with similar goals"[35] rather than a hierarchical organization. So, organizational differences have been indeed exaggerated and a closer look at the structures of traditional and "new" groups reveals similarities instead of the firm differences implied by the "new terrorism" thesis.

Operational Range

Advocates of the notion of 'new' terrorism point out that the campaigns of traditional, terrorist groups were of a territorial geographical orientation and restricted within the home region. This applied not only to the old ethno-nationalist groups but "it also applied to the adherents of supposedly global ideologies such as the Marxist terrorists in Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s who mostly had just one center of gravity towards which their activities and operations were directed".[36] Contrary to this traditional pattern of operational range, what we have witnessed, or so the argument goes, with the onset of "new" terrorism is the formation of terrorist groups that have become increasingly transnational in reach and orientation.[37] This is so because "old" terrorism was mostly associated with a nationalist or separatist agenda and, hence, with the political situation in a specific country or region, while "new" terrorism has a much more expansive geographical agenda

---

[32] Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.133.

[33] Field, "The 'New Terrorism', p.202.

[34] Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.133.

[35] Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda", p.14.

[36] Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism*, p.18–19.

[37] Ibid., p.20–21.

associated with a revision of the global *status quo* and the establishment of a new religious world order.[38] Consequently, "the 'new terrorism' is more than a threat to individual states and represents a challenge to the international system as a whole".[39]

Given the extent in which the transnational terrorist activity of al-Qaeda has colonized our collective political imaginary, to talk about the globalization of contemporary terrorism, or even more to the point about the globalization of martyrdom[40], is verging on the banality as it is to state the established common sense. Yet, as was the case with the organizational differences between traditional and "new" terrorism, things are not as commonsensical and uncontroversial as they may first appear. As argued earlier, to draw general conclusions on the basis of one case, no matter how spectacular, is to commit the most cardinal of methodological sins -selection on the dependent variable in order to make a point. Indeed a look at the data points to the opposite direction by that suggested by the perception that terrorism has become globalized. Goldman conducted an empirical, regression based, study of the globalization of terrorism thesis where the dependent variable was the geographic spread of terrorist attacks in a time frame spanning from 1968 to 2007.[41] The results of world trends for the universe of terrorist organizations and attacks are telling and suggestive of a *de*-globalization (or localization), rather than globalization, of terrorism during the last decade. In Goldman's words:

> in the 1990s and even more so in the 2000s, terror attacks become deglobalized (geographic contraction rather than expansion), as the number and percentage of terror organizations carrying out attacks outside their home base regions declined… In the first decade (1968-2007) about 17% of terror organizations carried out attacks outside their home base regions; these figures were 13% in the third decade (1988-1997). The corresponding figures were 24% for the second decade (1978-1987) but less than 5% for the last (1988-2007).[42]

In another recent study, Kis-Katos, Liebert and Schulze utilize an extended version of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which has the advantage of including both international and domestic events, with the purpose of investigating the heterogeneous nature of terrorism.[43] They present in figure 1 the distribution of domestic and international events in a time span from 1970 to 2008.

---

[38] Field, "The 'New Terrorism", p.198.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

[41] Ogen Goldman, "The Globalization of Terror Attacks", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.23, No.1, 2011.

[42] Goldman, "The Globalization of Terror Attacks", p.50

[43] Krisztina Kis-Katos, Helge Liebert and Günther Schulze, *On the Heterogeneity of Terror*, Working paper available at: http://www.pubchoicesoc.org/papers_2012/Schulze_Kis-Katos_Liebert.pdf, 2011.

Figure 1: Domestic and International Terror Events Worldwide from 1970-2008
Source: Kis-Katos, et.al., "On the Heterogeneity of Terror", p.28.
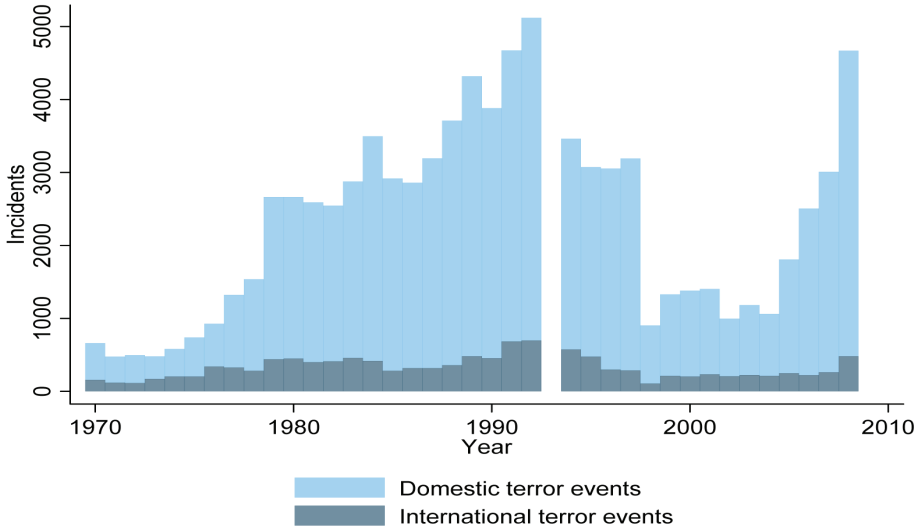
As the figure vividly illustrates, the picture that emerges by looking at the universe of events is nowhere close to being supportive to the globalization of terrorism thesis. Instead, the share of international incidents is particularly low and has been relatively constant over time. It seems that Sgt. Friday's insistence on the facts strikes back and offers a necessary corrective to our approach.

Motives

From the perspective of the "new" terrorism school of thought, "old", traditional terrorist groups were motivated by secular concerns, stemming from political ideology, national-separatist aspirations and ethnic conflict, and rational political reasons, like the mobilization of working class masses or the independence for their ethnic group. In contrast, "the phenomenon of the new terrorism differs fundamentally from the more familiar politically motivated terrorism".[44] Its motives "are derived exclusively from religious doctrines that emphasize transformational and apocalyptic beliefs, usually associated with Islam".[45] In turn, this religious motivation is producing "radically different value systems, mechanisms of legitimization and justification, concepts of morality and a Manichean world view".[46]

Furthermore, it is argued that this Manichean value system, generated by fanatical religious motivations, works hand in glove with a dramatic shift in the willingness of

---

[44] Simon and Benjamin quoted in Field, "The 'New Terrorism'".
[45] Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.122.
[46] Hoffman quoted in Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda is not so new", p.7.

terrorists to negotiate. Contrary to "old" terrorism whose specific demands were often rationally negotiable,[47] "today's terrorists don't want a seat at the table, they want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it".[48]

There is no doubt that religion is a core-defining feature of contemporary terrorist activity. But is this religious imperative as novel and unique as to legitimize the concept of "new" terrorism? Spencer provides a balanced reply, worth quoting at some length:

> Historically, religious terrorism is by no means a new phenomenon. According to David Rapoport, religiously motivated terrorism aimed at killing nonbelievers has existed for thousands of years. From the first-century Zealots to the thirteenth-century Assassins, and even up to the nineteenth century and the emergence of political motives such as nationalism, anarchism, and Marxism, 'religion provided the only acceptable justification for terror'. Religious motivation is not so much a new characteristic as it is a cyclic return to earlier motivations for terrorism.[49]

We fully agree and we would even go one-step further. Even if we do accept, for the sake of the argument with the advocates of 'new' terrorism, that what we are witnessing is the rise of a new wave of terrorism, there is one more lesson to be drawn from Rapoport's work on *The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism*.[50] Once placed in the context of the historical evolution of modern terrorism, the questionable advent of a religious fourth wave of terrorism is best seen as a historical development in the evolution of terrorist waves, which, like its preceding ones, it has not only a beginning but also an end. Indeed, in a recent empirical study that attempted to identify the life span of Rapoport's terrorist waves, Weinberg and Eubank argue that "the preceding waves of terrorist violence dissipated after approximately a generation, a period of roughly 20 to 30 years. The present wave has lasted for just about that length of time now".[51] An observation that leads them to believe that the current fourth wave may be already "on a downward trajectory".[52]

Finally, the argument that the absolutist religious motives of "new" terrorism have marked a significant shift in the willingness of terrorists to negotiate and compromise, commonsensical though it may first sound it calls for a more balance qualification. Antony Field sets the record straight by pointing out the following:

> In many cases secular motivations can be as uncompromising as religious principles. Witness the unwavering conviction of the suicide bombers associated to the secular Tamil Tigers, the leftist Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the ethno-

---

47 Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda is not so new", p.6.

48 Morgan quoted in Spencer, Ibid., p. 8.

49 Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda is not so new", p. 9.

50 David C. Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism", Audrey K. Cronin and James M. Ludes (Eds.), *Attacking Terrorism*, Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2004. Each of Rapoport's historical four waves of modern terrorism has had its own distinctive leitmotif: anarchism; national liberation; social revolution; religious transcendence.

51 Leonard Weinberg and William Eubank, "An End to the Fourth Wave of Terrorism?", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol.33, 2010, p.598-599.

52 Ibid., p.601.

separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)…The decision to seek a negotiated settlement is affected by a whole range of factors, including the political climate, the strength of the terrorist group and the strength of counter-terrorism measures…It is simplistic to suggest that the willingness of a terrorist group to negotiate is uni-causal and simply determined by whether the organization has secular or religious motivations.[53]

Tactics

The third area in which advocates of the concept of "new" terrorism argue that a significant change has occurred is that of tactics employed and the associated attitude towards violence. Essentially, "old" terrorism, because of its pursuit of legitimacy, "adopted a utilitarian approach to the use of violence, usually as part of a broader political campaign".[54] In general, "the 'old' terrorism is considered to be much more restrained and specific in targeting. The traditional terrorist wanted people watching, not people dead, according to Brian Jenkins' now famous aphorism".[55] Contrary to this traditional attitude, "new" terrorist groups display "an increasing willingness to use excessive, indiscriminate violence".[56] Hoffman explains this transformation in the following terms:

> Whereas secular terrorists regard violence either as a way of instigating the correction of a flaw in a system that is basically good or as a means to foment the creation of a new system, religious terrorists see themselves not as components of a system worth preserving but as "outsiders", seeking fundamental changes in the existing system.[57]

There is no doubt that the level of terrorism-induced lethality and civilian casualties has been on the increase during the last years. But is that evidence enough to adopt the above descriptions, and associated dichotomy of "old" and "new" terrorism, as accurate? The answer is in the negative once we take into account the following. Crenshaw captures neatly how misleading the distinction of "old" vs. "new" terrorism can be by pointing out that "levels of selectivity and restraint vary across groups and across time, but not according to a religious-secular or past-present divide".[58] The point seems to be supported by statistical data. Figure 2 is mapping fatalities by domestic and international events in a time frame spanning from 1970 to 2008.[59] The data point to a recent increase of lethality, as advocates of "new terrorism" would have it. Yet, the distribution of lethality is not suggestive of a rigid distinction between current and past lethality; on the contrary, lethality varies significantly across time and not across an "old" vs. "new" divide.

---

[53] Field, "The 'New Terrorism'", p.201-2.
[54] Field, "The 'New Terrorism'", p.199.
[55] Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.128.
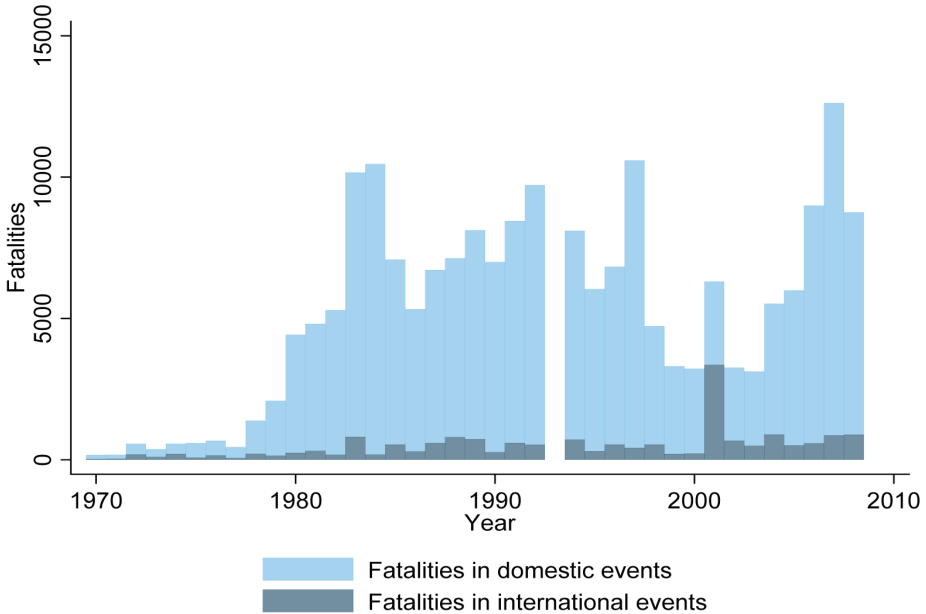[56] Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda is not so new", p.7.
[57] Quoted in Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.124.
[58] Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.128.
[59] Kis-Katos, *et.al.*, "On the heterogeneity of terror", p.28.

Figure 2: Domestic and International Terror Fatalities Worldwide from 1970-2008
Source: Kis-Katos, et.al., "On the Heterogeneity of Terror", p.28.

Let us also note here that one major cause of high numbers of civilian casualties is the adoption of suicide missions. Yet this is a tactic that has been employed by both secular and religious groups. Indeed, "indiscriminate mass-casualty attacks have long been a characteristic of terrorism"[60] and "the supposedly rational 'traditional' terrorists frequently attacked innocent civilians, often by detonating bombs in public areas with little or no warning".[61] Robert Pape who has studied the phenomenon of suicide terrorism extensively, notes: "although religious motives may matter, modern suicide terrorism is not limited to Islamic Fundamentalism. Islamic groups receive the most attention in Western media, but the world's leader in suicide terrorism is actually the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a group …whose ideology has Marxist/Leninist elements".[62]

Finally, the related to the above conventional perception that "old" terrorists deployed violence strategically and in a restrained fashion because violence for them was a means to a political end, whereas "new" terrorists are deploying violence in an extremist fashion because for them violence is an end in itself is over simplistic. It also fails to recognise that both "old" and "new" terrorists can use, and have used, violence strategically. Even the attacks of 9/11 by al-Qaeda, the canonical case of the advocates

---

[60] Spencer, "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda is not so new", p.10.
[61] Field, "The 'New Terrorism'", p.203.
[62] Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism", *American Political Science Review*, Vol.97, No.3, 2003, p.343.

of "new" terrorism, "were not simply a form of cathartic punishment; they also served a broader strategic purpose with the aim of coercing the government of the United States into changing its foreign policy".[63]

Attitude towards Westphalian System

If we were to take the above differences over motives and attitude towards violence to a higher level of abstraction it could be argued that another, ontologically prior, difference is with regard to the attitude towards the Westphalian system and its dominant norms and organizing principles. According to Zarakol, implicit in the traditional terrorism with an ethic-nationalist agenda was "a re-affirmation of the principles that organize the modern states system. Nationalist-secessionist terrorism derives its legitimacy claim from localized authority based on right to territory, which is similar to the organizing principles of the Westphalian system".[64] On the other hand, the type of terrorism perpetrated by groups such as al-Qaeda is ontologically different because its religious legitimacy claims and goals cannot be easily accommodated within the Westphalian order to which they constitute a direct threat.[65]

On the basis of the level of ontological threat that different types of terrorism pose to the Westphalian order, Zarakol identifies groups as either system-affirming or system-threatening. This is arguable an insightful and crucial distinction with important theoretical implications. However, in the context of the present analysis the distinction does not seem to confirm either the analytical value or the empirical veracity of the notion of "new terrorism". First off, as Zarakol herself points out, the first historical appearance of a system-threatening type of terrorism occurred in the late 19th century with the rise of anarchists. Secondly, the argument that with the advent of al-Qaeda "system-threatening terrorism has reached a new level of maturity"[66] is in need of qualification. there is no doubt that '[r]eligion defines several important aspects of al-Qaeda…Its immediate objectives, however, are almost certainly political rather than religious, just as are those of any other terrorist group".[67] Indeed, many of the alarming and system-threatening characteristics of "new terrorism" are "in fact characteristic of terrorism and radical politics as a whole, not just of religious terrorism".[68] It is for this reason that Crenshaw argues that "[e]ven if a conceptual distinction between types of terrorism can be established, it is not clear whether there is a chronological dimension".[69] So, the distinction "is not so much one between secularism and religion but one between reformism and revolutionary radicalism"[70], where system-threatening radicalism can be found in different historical periods and not just with the advent of "new" and religious terrorism.

---

[63] Field, "The 'New Terrorism'", p.203.

[64] Ayse Zarakol, "What makes Terrorism Modern? Terrorism, Legitimacy, and the International System", *Review of International Studies,* Vol.37, No.5, 2011, p.2316.

[65] Ibid., p.2316.

[66] Ibid., p.2317.

[67] Mark Sedgwick, "Al-Qaeda and the Nature of Religious Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2004, p.795-6.

[68] SIbid., p.808.

[69] Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.121.

[70] Sedgwick, "Al-Qaeda", p.808.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to take stock of the debate of "old" versus "new" terrorism by means of juxtaposing ideal types of both types. In so doing, we identified a number of similarities instead of rigid differences between the two. This led us to question both the analytical value and empirical veracity of the notion of "new terrorism", as the departure from the past is not as pronounced as advocates of the notion have it. Crenshaw summarizes succinctly the point by arguing that "[t]oday's terrorism is not a fundamentally or qualitatively 'new' phenomenon but grounded in an evolving historical context. Much of what we see now is familiar, and the differences are of degree rather than kind".[71] But if this is so, then why has this idea of a fundamentally "new terrorism" proved so attractive, especially in policy circles? Crenshaw hits again the nail on the head by pointing out that defining religious, jihadist terrorism as new is an effective way of framing the threat so as to mobilize both public and elite support for major policy change.[72] This is precisely what is at stake in a name and it has, as we argued, important implications at both the academic and policy level.

---

[71] Crenshaw, "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", p.120.

[72] Ibid., p.133.

Bibliography

Antony, Louise. "The Socialization of Epistemology", Robet E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p.58-77.

Carter, Ashton *et.al.* "Catastrophic Terrorism", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1998, p.80-94.

Crenshaw, Martha. "The Debate over 'New' vs. 'Old' Terrorism", I. A. Karawan, W. McCormack, and S. E. Reynolds (Eds.), *Values and Violence: Intangible Aspects of Terrorism*, Springer Science+Business Media B.V, 2008.

Cronin, Audrey Kurth. "How Al-Qaeda Ends", *International Security*, Vol.31, No.1, 2006, p.7-48.

Cronin, Audrey Kurth. "What is Really Changing? Change and Continuity in Global Terrorism", H. Strachan and S. Scheipers (Eds.), *The Changing Character of War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Drakos, Konstantinos and Andreas Gofas. "In Search of the Average Transnational Terrorist Attack Venue", *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2006, p.73-93.

Duyvesteyn, Isabelle. "How New is the New Terrorism?", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol.27, No.5, 2004, p.439-454.

English, Richard. *Terrorism: How to Respond*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Field, Antony. "The 'New Terrorism': Revolution or Evolution?" *Political Studies Review*, Vol.7, No.2, 2009, p.195-207.

Gofas, Andreas. "The Terrorism-Democracy Nexus and the Tradeoff between Security and Civil Liberties", Nikolaos Tzifakis (Ed.), *International Politics in Times of Change*, Heidelberg, Springer, 2012.

Gofas, Andreas and Colin Hay. "Varieties of Ideational Explanation". A.Gofas and C.Hay, (Eds.) *The Role of Ideas in Political Analysis*. London, Routledge, 2010.

Goldman, O. "The Globalization of Terror Attacks", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.23, No.1, 2011, p.31-59.

Gunaratna, Rohan. "Al-Qaeda is an Example of a 'New Terrorism'". S.Gottlieb (Ed.) *Debating Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Washington, DC, CQ Press, 2010.

Gunning, Jeroen. "A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies", *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2007, p.363–93.

Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

Jackson, Richard *et.al. Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2011.

Jackson, Richard, Marie Breen-Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning, (Eds.), *Critical Terrorism Studies*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2009.

Joseph, Jonathan. "Critical of What? Terrorism and its Study", *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2009, p.93–98.

Kegley, Charles. "The Characteristics, Causes, and Controls of the New Global Terrorism", C. Kegley (Ed.), *The New Global Terrorism*. New York, Prentice Hall, 2003.

Kis-Katos, Krisztina, Helge Liebert and Giinther Schulze. "On the heterogeneity of terror", Working paper available at: http://www.pubchoicesoc.org/papers_2012/Schulze_Kis-Katos_Liebert.pdf, 2011.

Kurtulus, Ersun N. "The 'New Terrorism' and its Critics", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 34, No. 6, 2011, p.476-500.

Laqueur, Walter. "Postmodern Terrorism", *Foreign Affairs*. September/October 1996, 1996, p.24-36.

Laqueur, Walter. *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Laqueur, Walter. *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*. New York, Continuum, 2003.

Lesser, Ian O. *Countering the New Terrorism*, Santa Monica CA, RAND Corporation, 1999.

Moghadam, Assaf. *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

Neumann, Peter R. *Old and New Terrorism*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009.

Pape, Robert A. "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism", *American Political Science Review*, Vol.97, No.3, 2003, p.343-361.

Rapoport, David. "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism". A.Cronin and J. Ludes (Eds.) *Attacking Terrorism*. Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2004.

Scheweitzer, Glenn E. *Superterrorism: Assassins, Mobsters, and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. New York, Plenum Trade, 1998.

Sedgwick, Mark. "Al-Qaeda and the Nature of Religious Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 2004, p.795-814.

Spencer, Alexander. "The 'new terrorism' of al-Qaeda is not so new". S.Gottlieb (Ed.), *Debating Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Washington, DC, CQ Press, 2010.

Tucker, David. "'What is New about the New Terrorism and How Dangerous is It?", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 13, No.3, 2001, 1-14.

Weinberg, Leonard and William Eubank, "An End to the Fourth Wave of Terrorism?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33, 2010, p.594-602.

Wight, Colin. "Theorising Terrorism: The State, Structure, and History", *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No 1, 2009, p.99-106.

Zarakol, Ayse. "What makes terrorism modern? Terrorism, legitimacy, and the international system", *Review of International Studies,* Vol. 37, No. 5, 2011, p.2311–2336.