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Is Terrorism Still a Democratic Phenomenon?

Erica CHENOWETH*

ABSTRACT

In recent years, multiple studies have confirmed that terrorism occurs in democracies more often than in nondemocratic regimes. There are five primary groups of explanations for this phenomenon, including the openness of democratic systems, organizational pressures resulting from democratic competition, the problem of underreporting in authoritarian regimes, gridlock resulting from multiparty institutions, and the coercive effectiveness of terrorism against democracies. Most of these studies, however, examine the relationship only through 1997. In this article, I explore whether terrorism has continued to occur more in democratic countries through 2010. I find that while terrorism is still prevalent in democracies, it has increased in “anocracies,” countries that policymakers would often describe as “weak” or “failed” states. I offer a potential reason for this increase: the American-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. I conclude by offering some insights into how the rise of terrorism in anocracies affects the typical explanations for terrorism and democracy, and I suggest a few ways to improve on our current understanding.

Keywords: Terrorism, Counter-terrorism, Weak States, Democracy, Anocracy, Iraq, Afghanistan, Occupation

Terörizm Hala Demokratik Bir Olgu mu?

ÖZET

Son dönemde terror üzerine yapılan çalışmaların çoğunluğu, terörizmin demokratik olmayan ülkelerden ziyade demokratik ülkelerde yaşandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu olguyu açıklamaya çalışan beş ana grup tanımlama bulunmaktadır: demokratik sistemlerin açıklığı, demokratik rekabetten kaynaklanan kurumsal baskılar, demokratik olmayan rejimlerdeki bilgilendirmeme sorunu, çok partili yapıların tıkanmaya neden olması ve terörizmin demokrasiler kaşısındaki baskıcı etkinliği. Bu çalışmaların büyük bir kısmı ne yazıkki 1997 sonrası dönemi incelemektedir. Bu çalışma 2010 yılında terörün demoratik ülkelerde daha fazla meydana gelip gelmediği incilenmektedir. Çalışma sonucunda terörizmin demokrasilerde hala daha yaygın olmakla birlikte siyasa yapıcılarca genellikle “başarısız” ya da “aciz” devletler olarak nitelenen “anokrasi”lerde arttığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Yazar bu artışın muhtemel nedeninin ABD’nin Irak ve Afganistan’ı işgali olduğunu iddia etmektedir. Çalışmada, anokrasilerde artan terörizmin terör ve demokrasi üzerine yapılan geleneksel açıklamaları nasıl etkilediği konusunda da bir takım değerlendirmelerde bulunularak güncel anlayışımızın iyileşmesine yenlik bir takım önerilerde bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Terörizm, Terörizmle Mücadele, Başarısız Devletler, Demokrasi, Anokrasi, Irak, Afganistan, İşgal

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American policymakers have consistently advanced the notion that bringing democracy to authoritarian regimes will reduce terrorism, as people became more “satisfied” under a more open and economically prosperous system of governance.¹ Indeed, American presidents have advanced this notion for decades, arguing that the best way to combat terrorism is to allow people the right to choose their own governments. In his 1996 *National Security Strategy for Engagement and Enlargement*, President Bill Clinton advanced the “liberal internationalist” view that democracies do not fight one another, and as such the United States should actively promote democracy in other countries as part of its security policy. The George W. Bush administration advanced this position even further, making democracy-promotion a core tenant of the so-called “Bush doctrine.”² In 2005, during his second inaugural address, President Bush made clear his view that “the best antidote to radicalism and terror is the tolerance kindled in free societies.”³ President Bush explicitly used this logic to justify regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as to pressure authoritarian regimes to reform to more democratic institutions and practices.⁴

Since 2009, President Obama has also perpetuated this policy, albeit in a more subtle way, arguing that the “United States supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad because governments that respect these values are more just, peaceful, and legitimate.”⁵ In 2011, with the onset of a number of uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, pundits and policymakers alike have advanced the notion that nonviolent, pro-democracy movements that are gaining ground against authoritarian regimes will readily supplant terrorists in those countries. Juan Zarate, a former Bush administration counterterrorism official, has argued that “If the street protests lead to a peaceful, pluralistic transition, that does huge damage to the al-Qaida narrative.”⁶ Optimists thus view the global spread of democracy as the beginning of the end of global terrorism.

Contrary to the views of many pundits and policymakers, however, academic studies have shown that such optimism may be misplaced. The historical record reveals that toward the end of the 20th century, terrorism was primarily a democratic phenomenon: between 1968 and 1997, terrorist attacks occurred with more frequency in democracies

¹ Terrorism is the deliberate use or threat of force against noncombatants by a non-state actor in pursuit of a political goal. Terrorism is distinguished from other forms of violence (such as civilian victimization during civil war) by its perceived randomness and its attempt to convey a political message beyond the immediate targets themselves. For a detailed discussion about defining terrorism, see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2nd edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, ch.1.

² Katerina Dalacoura, *Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.3-10.

³ Jim VandeHei, “Bush Calls Democracy Terror’s Antidote,” *Washington Post*, 9 March 2005, A16.

⁴ Dalacoura, *Islamist Terrorism*.

⁵ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 2010, p.37.

⁶ Quoted in Helene Cooper *et.al.*, “As Relations Unravel, U.S. Tries to See Future,” *The Seattle Times*, 2 February 2011.

than in nondemocratic regimes.⁷ This finding is puzzling for those who have viewed democracy as an “antidote” to terrorism.

Scholars have posited five primary explanations for this phenomenon. The first highlights the openness of democratic systems, which makes them vulnerable to intrusion by foreign terrorists, while guaranteeing the very rights and freedoms (e.g. assembly, speech, religious practice, etc.) that may facilitate the planning and implementation of terrorist attacks.⁸

The second set of arguments focuses less on regime openness per se, and more on organizational pressures that result from democratic competition. According to this approach, democracies are simply more densely populated with a variety of groups with competing interests, and the intensity of mobilization gives rise to incentives to use violence to outbid competitors.⁹

Third, some scholars have argued that the relationship between terrorism and democracy is related to the level of press freedom a country enjoys. Terrorists may attempt to maximize the symbolic value of their acts by concentrating their targets on countries with open presses, to make sure that their attacks are covered in spectacular ways. Others argue that because of variation in levels of press openness, the relationship between terrorism and democracy is simply an illusion—that terrorist attacks only *appear* to be causally related to democracy because democracies are more likely to report these attacks in the first place. Advanced by Konstantinos Drakos and Andreas Gofas, this argument suggests that terrorist attacks routinely occur in authoritarian regimes, but that such attacks go unnoticed because of restrictions on free reporting in such states.¹⁰

The fourth group of arguments identifies gridlock resulting from multiparty institutions, or the existence of “veto players,” as the primary culprit in explaining terrorism’s relationship to democracy. This argument suggests that democracies tend to be more prone to terrorist attacks because they possess a larger number of veto players who are able to stamp out or paralyze legislation in a way that makes progress toward particular political goals impossible. Frustration with the government’s poor performance results in a higher number of terrorist attacks as groups attempt to sway the polity toward decisiveness.¹¹

⁷ Erica Chenoweth, “Democratic Competition and Terrorist Activity”, *Journal of Politics*, Vol.72, No.1 January 2010, p.16-30; William Lee Eubank and Leonard Weinberg, “Does Democracy Encourage Terrorism?”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* Vol.6, No.4, 1994, p.417-463; William Lee Eubank and Leonard Weinberg, “Terrorism and Democracy: What Recent Events Disclose”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.10, No.1, 1998, p.108-118; William Lee Eubank and Leonard Weinberg, “Terrorism and Democracy: Perpetrators and Victims”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.13, No.1, 2001, p.155-164; James Piazza, “Do Democracy and Free Markets Protect Us from Terrorism?”, *International Politics*, Vol.45, 2008, p.72-91; Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, “Veto Players and Terror”, *Journal of Peace Research* Vol.48, No.1, January 2011, p.19-33.

⁸ Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol.13, 1981, p.379-99; Eubank and Weinberg, “Does Democracy Encourage Terrorism?”; Quan Li, “Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents?”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.49, No.2, April 2005, p.278-297; Alex Schmid, “Terrorism and Democracy”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.4, No.4, 1992, p.14-25.

⁹ Chenoweth, “Democratic Competition and Terrorist Activity.”

¹⁰ Konstantinos Drakos and Andreas Gofas, “The Devil You Know but are Afraid to Face: Underreporting Bias and its Distorting Effects on the Study of Terrorism”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.50, No.5, 2006, p.714-735; Konstantinos Drakos and Andreas Gofas, “Evidence for the Existence of Under-Reporting Bias in Observed Terrorist Activity: The Message in Press Freedom Status Transitions”, *Democracy and Security*, Vol.3, No. 2, 2007, p.139-155.

¹¹ Young and Dugan, “Veto Players and Terror.”

Fifth, some have argued that democracies are more prone to terrorism because democracies are more susceptible to manipulation by violent groups. Because it is easier to force a democracy to concede to violent demands, terrorist groups do not waste their time targeting autocracies. According to this view, terrorists strike wherever they estimate that they can win—usually democratic targets.¹²

But all of these arguments assume that democracies remain more susceptible to terrorism than nondemocracies. In this article, I explore whether terrorism has continued to be a democratic phenomenon through 2010. I find that while terrorism is still prevalent in democracies, it has increased in “anocracies”, or countries that suffer a breakdown in their institutions resulting in diminished functionality, unmitigated political competition, and leadership rivalries.¹³ I find that this phenomenon may be linked to the rise of terrorism in states where the United States has engaged in militarized regime change operations.

The Democracy-Terrorism Link: Five Core Arguments

Scholars have posited five primary groups of explanations for the seeming associate between democracy and terrorism. I review them and identify the enduring puzzles that emerge from each explanation.

Openness and Civil Liberties

First, the *openness* explanation argues that political and civil liberties are positively correlated with terrorism because of the increased opportunity and permissiveness of democratic systems.¹⁴ The freedoms of movement and association enjoyed within democracies provide opportunities for terrorist groups to take root in societies and perform actions against either their own governments or foreign governments abroad.

The openness argument is perhaps the most important contender, having served as the major point of departure for most previous research on the topic.¹⁵ But the argument has several key flaws. First, although respect for civil liberties may seem to provide a permissive environment for terrorism to thrive in democracies, a general adherence to civil liberties does not necessarily prohibit democracies from pursuing repressive counterterrorist tactics in practice. Indeed, some democratic electorates quickly and easily grant their executives extra powers in responding to terrorism. The United Kingdom’s perpetual adoption of Emergency Powers since the 1920s—often with a great deal of immediacy and virtually no resistance from the legislative and judiciary branches—is another example. Thus, democratic governments are quite capable of circumventing civil liberties during terrorist crises, and they have historically done so often with the public’s blessing.¹⁶

¹² Robert Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol.97, No.3, 2003, p.343-361.

¹³ Ted Robert Gurr, “Persistence and Change in Political Systems, 1800-1971”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol.68, No.4, December 1974, p.1487n11. These are often countries that policymakers would describe as “weak” or “failed” states.

¹⁴ Eubank and Weinberg, “Does Democracy Encourage Terrorism?”; Li, “Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorism Incidents?”.

¹⁵ Risa Brooks, “Researching Democracy and Terrorism: How Political Access Affects Militant Activity”, *Security Studies*, Vol.18, No.4, 2009, p.756-788; Crenshaw, “Causes of Terrorism”; Eubank and Weinberg, “Does Democracy Encourage Terrorism?”; Li, “Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorism Incidents?”; Schmid, “Terrorism and Democracy”.

¹⁶ Laura K. Donohue, *Counter-Terrorist Law and Emergency Powers in the United Kingdom, 1922-2000*, Portland, Or., Irish Academic Press, 2001.

Second, even if civil liberties allow terrorists to thrive, this explanation fails to account for the motivation to use terrorism. All other things being equal, the openness explanation assumes that the world is full of aspiring terrorists, and democracies are the countries where such ambitions can be realized because authoritarian regimes crush terrorists within their borders. It essentially assumes that terrorism will simply emerge wherever it can, needing no reason or justification behind this mobilization. However, why would terrorist groups (especially domestic groups) use violence to disrupt conventional politics in spite of legal channels to pursue their interests? In other words, what motivates citizens of democratic countries to engage in costly, violent acts to express their political preferences in spite of legal means to do so? The opportunity structure alone is insufficient to explain the proliferation of terrorist groups in democracies. There must be some other factor(s) that affect the growth of terrorism as well.

Third, the openness explanation fails to account for why the frequency of terrorist attacks varies in countries, even though the degree of civil liberties remains the same. The United States, for example, has long possessed the highest score (a 1 out of 7) on Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" survey—a score that has remained constant from 1973 through 2011. If civil liberties were the most important factors predicting terrorism, we would expect a fairly high and quite stable pattern of terrorist activity in the United States over time. Instead, the level of terrorist activity within the US, however, has varied widely from 1973 to 2011, suggesting that the relationship between civil liberties and terrorism is not a direct one.

Fourth, the openness explanation does not necessarily show why terrorism should occur in democracies. Instead, the purported causal relationship is really, about whether a state has the *capacity* to undermine terrorist efforts—and many states can be constrained in this regard (not just democracies). Thus we should expect to see democracies and weak states in the same category—countries where there is a high degree of opportunity to engage in terrorism. Yet from 1968 to 1997, democracies were much more frequent targets of terrorists than most weak states.¹⁷

Competition

The *competition* explanation suggests that democracies are simply more prone to a variety of forms of mobilization in general, with terrorism emerging as one tactical innovation in a constantly expanding repertoire of contention. According to this view, many groups and individuals resort to terrorism almost inadvertently out of a desire to magnify their voices in a seemingly uneven playing field of powerful competitors—without necessarily rationally considering the likely outcomes of the violence or whether it gives them a real advantage in the game.¹⁸

There are two primary problems with this approach. First, competition is not limited to democratic countries. Many nondemocracies experience similar levels of mobilization—both nonviolent and violent—yet experience very little terrorism. China and many of the former Soviet Republics come to mind as places where a considerable amount of protest activity occurs without provoking cycles of violence.

Second, as with many of the explanations that rely on organizational dynamics to explain terrorist behavior, the competition argument over-predicts the level of terrorism

¹⁷ Chenoweth, "Democratic Competition and Terrorist Activity."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

that should occur. If terrorist groups follow an escalatory logic, then we should expect to see exponential increases in terrorist violence. Instead, we see ebbs and flows, indicating that groups restrain themselves as much as they compete with other groups for power.

Publicity and Underreporting Bias

Third is the *publicity* explanation, which has two purported effects. First, proponents argue that press freedom has a direct effect on terrorism because countries with the highest level of press openness are the most likely to fully report terrorist activities. Because the media is like oxygen for terrorism, terrorist attacks should occur where media coverage is the most independent and conducive to sensationalist coverage. Terrorists who target countries with a high degree of press freedom are seeking the most publicity.

The second effect is indirect, in that countries without a free press are more likely to be authoritarian regimes, whose interest is in underreporting terrorist attacks. Thus, the effect of press freedom would not be causal, but simply correlates to low terrorism attacks because of a deliberate suppression of information about attacks when they occur.¹⁹

The publicity argument is problematic for several reasons. First, this perspective fails to explain why terrorists target some countries with high levels of media freedom and not others. If press freedom had a uniformly positive effect on terrorists target selection, then we would expect the countries with the highest degrees of media freedom being the routine targets of terrorism. Yet many countries with high rankings of press freedom—such as Canada, Switzerland, and Australia—are relatively immune from terrorist violence.

Second, publicity effects cannot usefully explain why terrorist incidents rise and fall within countries that maintain high levels of media freedom. Similar to the problems with the openness argument, if publicity alone were driving the target selection of terrorists, then we would expect to see an ever-increasing level of violence in countries that maintained a free and open press. Instead, we see peaks and valleys within such countries. Therefore, although it is without a doubt that terrorists exploit media attention, press freedom is not necessarily the most important factor in their targeting of democratic countries.

Third, because of the widespread adoption of information technologies in both democratic and nondemocratic countries, targeting a democratic country is no longer cost effective. Take the example of the decapitation of Nicholas Berg, an American contractor who was kidnapped in Iraq and beheaded in 2004. The attack was filmed and broadcast on the Internet, even though it did not occur in a democracy with a high level of press freedom. The increasing use of the Internet—even in authoritarian regimes—means that even if terrorist groups used to concentrate their attacks on countries with a free press, they no longer need to do so.

Finally, although some scholars insist that the preponderance of missing data on terrorist attacks occurs in authoritarian regimes, no scholars have proffered conclusive evidence to this effect. In the conflict literature, researchers are often able to uncover evidence of violent events occurring in the past, either through witness testimony or archives that become available after the country has achieved a sufficient amount of liberalization.

¹⁹ Drakos and Gofas, “The Devil You Know”; Drakos and Gofas, “Evidence for the Existence of Under-Reporting Bias”.

Yet no scholars have uncovered proof that violent attacks have been overlooked by the relevant databases. Moreover, the most comprehensive database on terrorist incidents, the Global Terrorism Database, confirms the positive correlation between democracy and terrorism, even though it contains far more observations of terrorism in authoritarian regimes than the database that previously dominated terrorism studies. Therefore, the argument that press freedom leads to a spurious relationship between democracy and terrorism has some empirical support,²⁰ but it is far from conclusive.

Veto Players, Deadlock, and Government Ineffectiveness

The fourth arguments identify the presence of multiple institutional veto players as the source of deadlock in government.²¹ Deadlock, which reduces government responsiveness to public concerns, creates frustration especially among groups that perceive themselves to be a political minority, such as an ethnic or religious minority within a large country. Frustration with this type of deadlock then results in a higher number of terrorist attacks as groups attempt to sway the polity toward decisiveness.²²

The primary problem with this argument is that the number of veto players in a state is a relatively static, whereas the number of terrorist attacks often fluctuates dramatically in such states. Moreover, it is unclear whether the terrorist attacks are causally related to veto players and their attendant political environments. To illustrate: during the postwar period, Italy has possessed a considerably high number of veto players because of its multi-party, parliamentary system. In fact, through the mid-1970s, the high number of veto players led to such an inability to escape the status quo that the Italian government frequently had to dissolve to re-create actionable coalitions, which were virtually identical until the 1970s. During this same period, however, there was wild variation in the number of terrorist attacks in Italy, and these attacks were directed toward the center-right government's policies rather than its inaction.

Furthermore, the argument over-predicts the incidence of terrorism. It assumes that people are naturally drawn to terrorism as a way to express their dissatisfaction with government performance, yet few people actually do so. Instead, we often see a large degree of nonviolent mobilization, labor activity, and opposition party organization in such circumstances. In other words, the causal link between veto players and violence is not entirely clear.

Coercive Effectiveness

The third group of explanations concerns the expected utility of using terrorism—what some call *coercive effectiveness*.²³ Some have argued that democracies are easier to manipulate through violent coercion. Because democratic leaders are electorally accountable to their

²⁰ Drakos and Gofas, "The Devil You Know"; Drakos and Gofas, "Evidence for the Existence of Under-Reporting Bias".

²¹ Young and Dugan, "Veto Players and Terror".

²² Ibid.

²³ Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism".

own publics, they are especially sensitive to civilian casualties. Terrorists know this, and focus their attacks on democratic countries because they anticipate a high return from such violence. In evaluating the evidence, I argue that all three of these arguments, although perhaps relevant in some cases, are dubious explanations for the systematic, global relationship between democracy and terrorism.

The coercive effectiveness explanation is also lacking in several important regards. First, the argument is based on data that essentially lumps terrorist groups with insurgent groups and has been subject to numerous nontrivial critiques. Most importantly, however, is the fact that terrorism tends to be miserably ineffective in producing political results.²⁴ Relative to other successful types of political action, like nonviolent direct action, terrorism almost never succeeds, even against democracies.²⁵ Thus, the empirical record to support the coercive effectiveness explanation simply does not exist.

Enduring Questions

All of these arguments rest on the empirical claim that democracies are, in fact, more susceptible to terrorism than nondemocracies. According to existing explanations, the empirical pattern of terrorism in democracies should persist over time. But most of these studies examine the relationship between 1968 and 1997 due to data limitations, meaning that few have explored whether the link between democracy and terrorism persists into the 21st century. This is a nontrivial omission, because terrorism has arguably become a much more prominent global security concern only after 2001. In the next section, I explore whether the empirical pattern of terrorism in democracies persists through 2010.

Patterns of Terrorism from 1990 to 2010: Still a Primarily Democratic Phenomenon

To explore more current patterns of regime type and terrorism, I make use of the POLITY IV data on regime type, as well as the Global Terrorism Database.²⁶ First, to create regime type categories, I adopt the POLITY IV project's minimalist definition of democracy, which is defined as a country that allows for competitive recruitment of political leaders (free and fair elections), constraints on the executive (checks and balances, as well as separation of powers), and political competition among opposition groups. An authoritarian regime is a regime in which elections are not held (or are not free and fair), the executive has few constraints on power, and political competition is highly restricted to favored groups. I use the terms "authoritarian regime," "dictatorship," "autocracy," and "nondemocracy" interchangeably. An anocracy is a country that is currently experiencing

²⁴ Max Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work", *International Security*, Vol.31, No.2, 2006, p.42-78.

²⁵ Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, New York, Columbia, 2011.

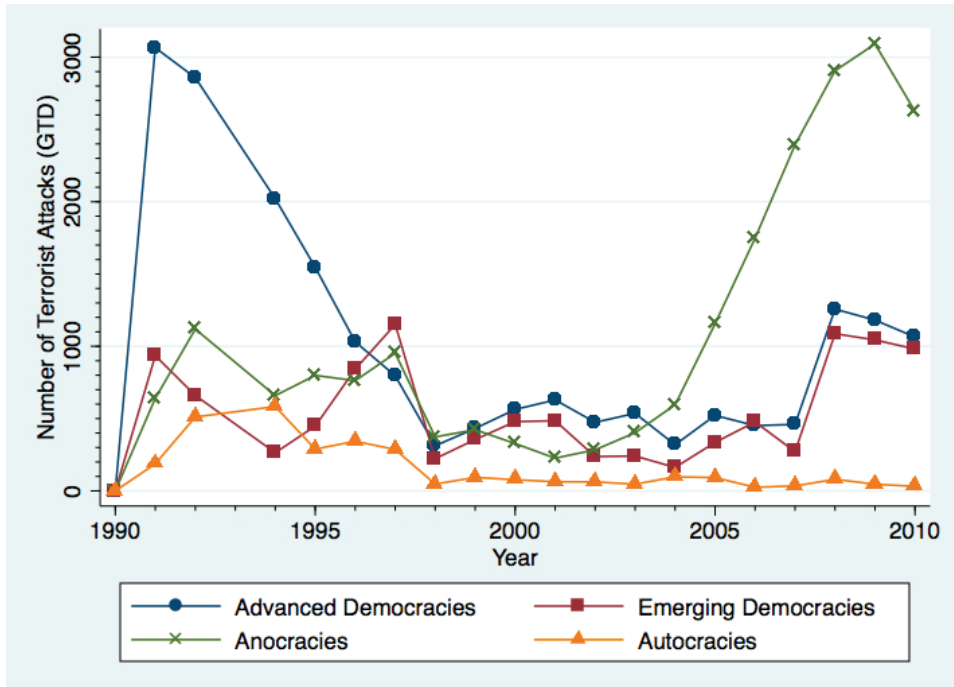
²⁶ Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan, *The Global Terrorism Database, 2011 Version*, Available at <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/> (Accessed on 5 October 2011).

a breakdown in its institutions such that it “has minimal functions, an uninstitutionalized pattern of political competition, and executive leaders constantly imperiled by rival leaders.”²⁷

The POLITY IV database assigns a score to each country in the world from 1800 to 2010. The score captures six component measures that assess qualities of executive recruitment, constraints on executive authority, and political competition. The scores are compiled into a 21-point scale, which ranges from -10 (hereditary monarchy or totalitarian regimes) to +10 (consolidated democracy). I follow the Polity project’s recommendation of converting the scores to the three categories of autocracies (-10 to -6), anocracies (-5 to +5 and the three special values of -66, -77, or -88), and democracies (+6 to +10). I label countries as “advanced democracies” if their POLITY scores are 8 or higher. I label them “emerging” democracies if their POLITY scores are between 5 and 7.²⁸

Figure 1 identifies the total distribution of transnational and domestic terrorist attacks among advanced democracies, emerging democracies, authoritarian regimes, and anocracies.

Figure 1: Regime Type and Terrorist Incidents, 1990-2010



²⁷ Gurr, “Persistence and Change in Political Regimes,” p.1487n11.

²⁸ Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jagers, *POLITY IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2011 Dataset User’s Manual*. Available at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm> (Accessed on 10 January 2012).

Several points are immediately obvious from Figure 1. First, since 1990, terrorism has remained a democratic phenomenon, occurring in advanced and emerging democracies at roughly the same rate as in anocracies, and at more than three times the rate as in autocracies. This is certainly a surprising finding, considering policymakers' confidence in democracy's pacifying effects on societies. The data do show a decline in terrorism in democracies—as well as a decline in terrorism overall—from the late 1990s through the early 2000s, with the number of terrorist attacks converging for all regime types during that time. This may be explained by the fact that since 9/11, the global community of democracies has been engaged in an unprecedented and coordinated fight against terrorism, thereby reducing terrorism levels for several years as terrorist activities were successfully obstructed. But perhaps most importantly, one can see that since about 2003, terrorism has skyrocketed in the case of anocracies—an unprecedented development until the mid-2000s, and essentially replacing democracies as the primary targets of terrorist violence.

Thus, the two major observations one may make from Figure 1 contradict the expectations of both policymakers and academics. Terrorism continues to plague democracies, but terrorism in illiberal regimes has dramatically increased through 2010.²⁹ The former phenomenon is a puzzling for policymakers, who have argued that promoting democracy will reduce terrorism; the latter phenomenon is puzzling for scholars of terrorism, who have argued that there is a consistent and seemingly permanent link between democracy and terrorism, relative to other regime types. How can we square the circle?

Preliminary evidence suggests that the rise of terrorism in anocracies can be attributed to the United States' militarized regime change operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which ultimately created the opportunity for this violence to thrive in these countries, while exacerbating terrorist violence in Pakistan—a part of the Southwest Asian theater of operations in the United States' fight against violent extremism.

In order to determine whether this was the case, we would need to determine which countries are responsible for the most terrorist attacks since 1990. Table 1 contains data on the country-years with the highest number of terrorist incidents, according to the GTD, listed from highest to lowest. Democracies are italicized for contrast.

Anocracies represent thirteen of the top twenty-five country-years, whereas democracies represent twelve. Moreover, among the democracies on the list, few of them are really “model” democracies per se. It is obvious that the U.S. invasion of Iraq has resulted in some of the deadliest terrorist campaigns in the last decade, with an alarming trend toward increasing violence in Iraq in recent years—even those years following the 2007-2007 troop surge that was meant to stabilize the country. Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India also feature prominently on the list, as does Colombia. However, the highest frequencies of terrorism in Colombia occurred during the 1990s, whereas the high numbers of terrorist violence have occurred literally within the past five years in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. Terrorist attacks in Iraq and the Afghanistan-Pakistan

²⁹ These trends hold whether one considers the targets of domestic terrorism (attacks coming from within the target country, which are the far more common type) or transnational terrorism (attacks coming from abroad).

theater have succeeded U.S. militarized occupations and operations there, indicating that the occupations and attempts to create democracy in these countries have exacerbated terrorist violence there. India's recent increases in violence owe mainly to an upsurge in attacks by the Communist Party of India (CPI-M), a Maoist insurgency suspected of widespread terrorist attacks during this period.³⁰

Table 1: The Top Twenty-Five Country-Years of Terrorism since 1990 (GTD)

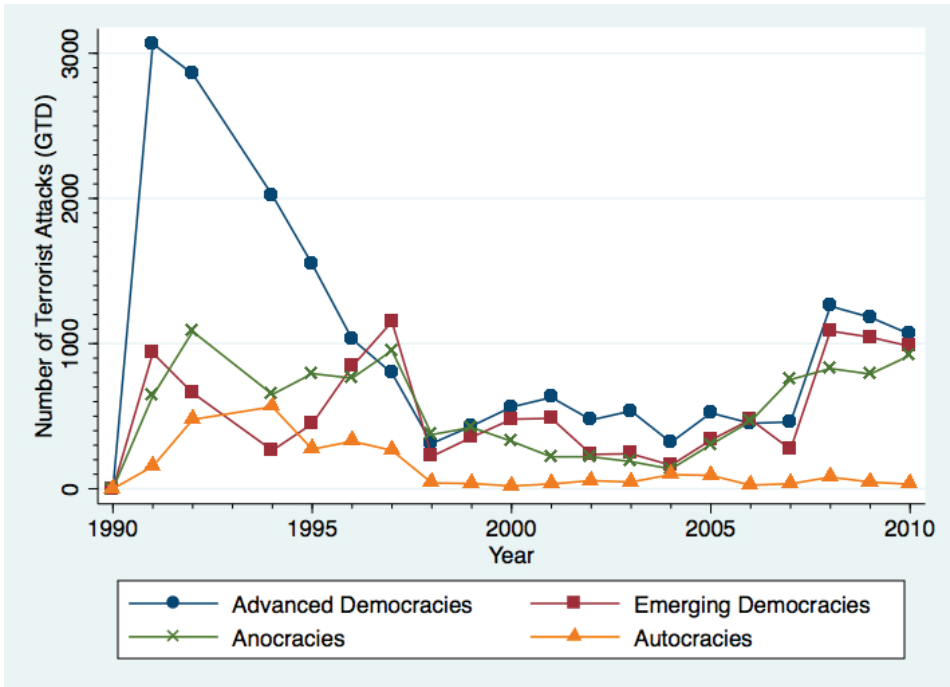
Country	Year	Total Attacks	Regime Type
Iraq	2010	1176	Anocracy
Iraq	2009	1134	Anocracy
Iraq	2008	1103	Anocracy
Iraq	2007	1041	Anocracy
Iraq	2006	836	Anocracy
<i>Pakistan</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>699</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
<i>India</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>671</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
Pakistan	2009	667	Anocracy
<i>Pakistan</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>666</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
<i>Peru</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>659</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
<i>India</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>651</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
Iraq	2005	619	Anocracy
<i>Colombia</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>598</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
Pakistan	2008	563	Anocracy
Afghanistan	2010	530	Anocracy
<i>Colombia</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>524</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
<i>India</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>516</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
<i>Turkey</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>515</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
Afghanistan	2009	500	Anocracy
<i>El Salvador</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>500</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
<i>Colombia</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>419</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
Afghanistan	2008	412	Anocracy
<i>Colombia</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>409</i>	<i>Democracy</i>
Peru	1992	383	Anocracy
Afghanistan	2007	345	Anocracy

³⁰ Global Terrorism Database – India. Available at <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/> (Last accessed on 5 October 2011).

From looking at Table 1, the possibility that the United States' occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have led to the overall increases in global terrorist violence seems to make sense on the surface.³¹

Figure 2 shows the overall trends of terrorism and regime type excluding the prominent cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

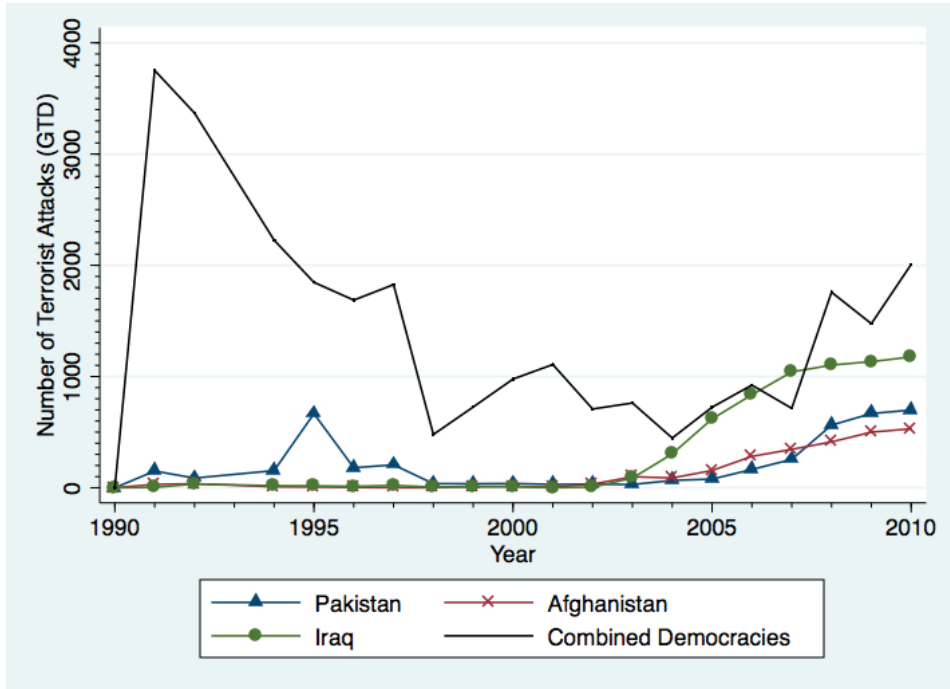
Figure 2: Regime Type and Terrorist Incidents (Excluding Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), 1990-2010



By excluding Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, we can see that the number of terrorist incidents in anocracies and “weak” democracies is no greater than it has been during earlier periods, indicating that except for these unique cases anocracies are not producing more terrorism than advanced or emerging democracies.

³¹ Moreover, they are both active combat zones, so it is unclear whether attacks that occurred in these two countries after 2003 were actually terrorist incidents or events perpetrated by Iraqi insurgents against Coalition troops. Insurgent attacks might be falsely coded as terrorist attacks, because American and European news sources often reported insurgent combat activities as “terrorist” attacks, especially because they occurred in the context of the United States’ “Global War on Terrorism.” Such attacks would not be considered “terrorist attacks” according to the definition I use here.

Figure 3: Terrorism in Iraq and the Afghanistan-Pakistan Theater Compared with Terrorism in Combined Democracies, 1990-2010



In Figure 3, one can see the distribution of attacks in combined democracies compared to those in Iraq and the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. Although Iraq briefly had more terrorist violence than all of the democracies in the world combined (2007), democracies have experienced an upsurge in terrorism between 2007 and 2010. Yet we can also see that if we combined the figures for Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, the number of terrorist attacks in these countries would easily surpass the number of terrorist attacks in democracies.

These trends indicate some interesting research opportunities for scholars to pursue. The first is the question of why Iraq and the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater have become such hotbeds for terrorist activity. To some, the United States' occupation is the most obvious reason. But there are also good reasons to expect the United States' occupation to have quelled terrorist violence in these places—especially the fact that terrorism has become increasingly risky and costly in such places. Why has the U.S. presence exacerbated terrorist violence rather than reducing it?

Second, although terrorism remains prevalent in advanced democracies, the number of terrorist incidents in emerging democracies and anocracies has become virtually identical to that of democracies. Most of the arguments indicated above suggest that terrorism is primarily a democratic phenomenon and will continue to increase in democracies, not decrease. Hence, what explains the decline of terrorism in democratic countries? If the recent empirical trend persists, new data will require scholars to re-

evaluate many of the theories established regarding the relationship between democracy and terrorism—and regarding the relationship between regime type and terrorism altogether.

Conclusion and Implications for the Future

Contrary to the views of many pundits, strengthening the democratic institutions and values within such countries does not necessarily eliminate terrorism from within them. In fact, as authoritarian regimes around the world succumb to pro-democracy movements—or fall to foreign-imposed regime change from without—we should expect to see *more* terrorism, not less.

The implications of these arguments are profound, and they challenge conventional wisdom within the policy and academic spheres. The data provides an important objection to the prevailing wisdom that democracy is an antidote to terrorism—a notion that has permeated U.S. foreign policy for decades. Scholars and policymakers alike have routinely argued that democracy—especially combined with economic opportunity—removes the underlying reasons that individuals join terrorist groups. The United States especially has been steadfast in its emphasis of free market competition and political pluralism as the ideal domestic systems through which to undermine terrorist groups abroad. From Bill Clinton to George W. Bush to Barack Obama, American presidents have advocated democracy-promotion as crucial to the U.S. effort to defeat terrorist groups abroad.

But recent trends suggest that as democracy spreads as the primary form of governance around the world—or as countries pass through periods of “anocratization” en route to democratic development—terrorism is likely to increase as a form of political contestation—not decrease. Instead of defeating terrorism by encouraging democratic development abroad, unqualified democracy-promotion or regime change may exacerbate preexisting tendencies toward violent mobilization—or even create these tendencies where they did not exist in the first place. Indeed, the only countries that remain impervious to terrorist violence are authoritarian regimes.

There is no easy solution to these problems. Reinforcing and arming authoritarian governments to attempt to crush the groups is not only morally problematic—it could also be a strategic disaster. Supporting Hosni Mubarak’s regime in the name of joint counterterrorism efforts cost the United States in terms of its legitimacy, credibility, and sincerity in the Middle East and North Africa. Providing Pakistan with the financial and military means to root out Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives in the Northwest Frontier has yielded few strategic benefits for the United States, while costing billions of dollars and countless lives.

Thus shoring up authoritarian regimes is not the answer. Instead, the United States and its allies should practice genuine democracy at home and endorse genuine democracy abroad. However, it must be recognized that not all good things go together—that often, democracy means internal turmoil, and that transitional and even advanced democracies often pay a price to maintain their institutions, practices, and principles.

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