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Brian Michael Jenkins



December 1980

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THE STUDY OF TERRORISM: DEFINITIONAL PROBLEMS*

Brian Michael Jenkins

The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California

November 1980

Terrorism has become part of our daily news diet. Hardly a day goes by without news of an assassination, political kidnapping, hijacking, or bombing somewhere in the world. As such incidents of terrorism have increased in the past decade, the phenomenon of terrorism has become one of increasing concern to governments and of increasing interest to scholars.

In the course of its continuing research on terrorism, The Rand Corporation has compiled a chronology of international terrorism incidents that have occurred since 1968. This chronology now contains over 1,000 incidents. In compiling the chronology, numerous problems of definition were encountered.

The term "terrorism" has no precise or widely-accepted definition. The problem of defining terrorism is compounded by the fact that terrorism has recently become a fad word used promiscuously and often applied to a variety of acts of violence which are not strictly terrorism by definition. It is generally pejorative. Some governments are prone to label as terrorism all violent acts committed by their political opponents, while anti-government extremists frequently claim to be the victims of government terror. What is called terrorism thus seems to depend on one's point of view. Use of the term implies a moral judgment; and if one party can successfully attach the label *terrorist* to its opponent, then it has indirectly persuaded others to adopt its moral viewpoint. Terrorism is what the bad guys do.

The word *terrorism* is also an attention-getting word and therefore tends to be used, especially in the news media, to heighten the drama

*This paper was originally presented at the 1978 meeting of The Institute of Management Sciences and Operations Research Society of America, New York, May 3, 1978. It will be included as a chapter in a forthcoming book published by Pergamon Press.

surrounding any act of violence. What we have, in sum, is the sloppy use of a word that is rather imprecisely defined to begin with. Terrorism may properly refer to a specific set of actions the primary intent of which is to produce fear and alarm that may serve a variety of purposes. But terrorism in general usage frequently is also applied to similar acts of violence--all ransom kidnappings, all hijackings, thrill-killings--which are not all intended by their perpetrators to be primarily terror-producing. Once a group carries out a terrorist act, it acquires the label *terrorist*, a label that tends to stick; and from that point on, everything this group does, whether intended to produce terror or not, is also henceforth called terrorism. If it robs a bank or steals arms from an arsenal, not necessarily acts of terrorism but common urban guerrilla tactics, these too are often described as terrorism. Eventually, *all* similar acts by other groups also come to be called terrorism. At some point in this expanding use of the term, terrorism can mean just what those who use the term (not the terrorist) want it to mean--almost any violent act by an opponent.

The difficulty of defining terrorism has led to the cliché that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. The phrase implies that there can be no objective definition of terrorism, that there are no universal standards of conduct in peace or war. That is not true.

Most civilized nations have identified through law modes of conduct that are criminal, among them homicide, kidnapping, threats to life, the willful destruction of property. Such laws may be violated in war, but even in war there are rules that outlaw the use of certain weapons and tactics.

The rules of war grant civilian noncombatants at least theoretical immunity from deliberate attack. They prohibit taking civilian hostages and actions against those held captive. The rules of war recognize neutral territory. Terrorists recognize no neutral territory, no noncombatants, no bystanders. They often seize, threaten, and murder hostages. One man's terrorist is everyone's terrorist.

Terrorism, in the Rand chronology, is defined by the nature of the act, not by the identity of the perpetrators or the nature of

their cause. All terrorist acts are crimes--murder, kidnapping, arson. Many would also be violations of the rules of war, if a state of war existed. All involve violence or the threat of violence, often coupled with specific demands. The violence is directed mainly against civilian targets. The motives are political. The actions generally are carried out in a way that will achieve maximum publicity. The perpetrators are usually members of an organized group, and unlike other criminals, they often claim credit for the act. And finally the act is intended to produce effects beyond the immediate physical damage.

The fear created by terrorists may be intended to cause people to exaggerate the strength of the terrorists and the importance of their cause, to provoke extreme reactions, to discourage dissent, or to enforce compliance.

This definition of terrorism would not limit the application of the term solely to nongovernmental groups. Governments, their armies, their secret police may also be terrorists. Certainly the threat of torture is a form of terrorism designed to inspire dread of the regime and obedience to authorities. Some scholars make a semantic distinction here, reserving the term "terrorism" for nongovernmental groups, while using the term "terror" to describe incidents of state terrorism. There are few incidents of state terrorism or terror in our chronology, not because it is considered to be less heinous, but because such terrorism tends to be internal rather than international. However, there are some international incidents of state terrorism: the assassination of a troublesome exile like Trotsky is an example. A more recent example may be the assassination in Washington, D.C. of a former Chilean cabinet minister, an action that was carried out by anti-Cuban extremists operating at the behest of the Chilean security services.

International terrorism comprises those incidents of terrorism that have clear international consequences: incidents in which terrorists go abroad to strike their targets, select victims or targets because of their connections to a foreign state (diplomats, executives of foreign corporations), attack airliners on international flights, or force airliners to fly to another country. It excludes the considerable amount of terrorist violence carried out by terrorists operating within their own country against their own nationals,

and in many countries by governments against their own citizens. For example, Irish terrorists blowing up other Irishmen in Belfast would not be counted, nor would Italian terrorists kidnapping Italian officials in Italy. Of course, such terrorism, although beyond the scope of our specific research task, is also of common interest and concern as it may lead to actions that will imperil foreign nationals, be carried abroad to other countries, be imitated by other groups, affect the stability of nations individually and collectively, strain relations between nations, or constitute intolerable violations of fundamental human rights, making it a matter of universal concern. Thus, while our research focuses on the specific problem of international terrorism, we find ourselves inevitably trespassing into into an area of internal political violence as it bears upon the subject of international terrorism.

The Central Intelligence Agency, in its reports on the subject, makes a distinction between "transnational terrorism," which is terrorism "carried out by basically autonomous non-state actors, whether or not they enjoy some degree of support from sympathetic states," and "international terrorism" which is terrorism carried out by individuals or groups controlled by a sovereign state. This author, frankly, is somewhat skeptical about our ability to make such a distinction, as a growing number of terrorist operations seem to be virtually commissioned by governments. This trend will continue. The CIA also recognizes this problem and in a footnote goes on to say, "Given the element of governmental patronage that is common to both, the boundary line between transnational and international terrorism is often difficult to draw. To the degree that it can be determined, the key distinction lies in who is calling the shots with respect to a given action or campaign. Hence, groups can and do drift back and forth across the line. For example, even a one-time 'contract job' undertaken on behalf of a governmental actor by a group that normally acts according to its own lights qualifies as international terrorism."* In the Rand chronology, we stuck to the term "international terrorism," and attempted to make no distinction on the basis of government support.

* David L. Milbank, *International and Transnational Terrorism: Diagnosis and Prognosis*, Central Intelligence Agency, April 1976, iii, p. 9.

This definition seemed pretty straightforward until we actually tried to use it in selecting incidents for our chronology of international terrorism. The chronology was to provide not only an historical record of international terrorism but was also to give some idea of the scope of the problem and allow the identification of trends.

We ran into several problems from the start. We decided that we would exclude incidents of terrorism that occurred in the middle of a war. There were potentially thousands of incidents of terrorism in Indochina, and in the Middle East, for example, during the civil war in Lebanon, some of international character. It would, however, be impossible to record all of these as they were submerged in a higher level of violence. Nor did we wish to engage in an unproductive debate as to whether the shelling of an Israeli kibbutz or the bombing of Hanoi constituted an act of international terrorism. The major incidents of obvious terrorism--the seizure of hostages in a border settlement, the murder of an official of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Beirut or West European capital--were picked up. When a Palestinian terrorist operation provoked an Israel military reprisal, we listed both.

Hijackings presented another problem. Would we include hijackings of airliners by people seeking political asylum? These certainly are not the same as hijackings by groups to publicize a political cause or coerce governments into making political concessions. Certainly the two are not in the same category except that the lives of innocent bystanders are often jeopardized to satisfy basically political goals--asylum or revolution. The borderline separating political motives from highly personal motives and purely criminal motives is not always clear. We decided not to try to decipher motives. We would include all hijackings except those carried out for obvious criminal intent--individuals demanding cash and a parachute.

A further problem arose in deciding whether to include the activities of separatist groups. As mentioned previously, our definition of international terrorism would exclude the Irish terrorists blowing up other Irishmen in Belfast. We would, of course, include

IRA operations abroad such as the mailing of a letter bomb to a British official in Washington or the assassination of the British ambassador to the Republic of Ireland. We decided also to include IRA bombings in England; in a sense, this represented carrying the campaign abroad. To maintain consistency, we had to include bombings in New York and Chicago by Puerto Rican separatists. Would we then include actions by Corsican separatists if they took place on the French mainland? We have not done so to date but to remain consistent with our decision in the Irish case, I suppose we should. Must we then also include the terrorist activities of Basque and Breton separatists if they operate outside their own province? Even with a fairly precise definition, many decisions quickly become subjective. It becomes slippery around the edges.

Finally, we sometimes chose to list some incidents as one, for example, a single mailing of letter bombs, rather than list it as 40 to 50 separate acts of terrorism. This decision was made in order to avoid distorting the annual total of incidents. On the other hand, a bombing campaign over a period of time, carried on by a single group, was listed as a series of separate actions.

Despite these definition problems, which pertain to only a fraction of the total number of incidents, the chronology has been a useful tool in assessing the magnitude of the problem. The results are sometimes intriguing. We discovered, for example, that the level of international terrorism based upon the chronology does not exactly accord with the public's perception of the problem of terrorism nor with government reaction. To illustrate the point, the total number of incidents of international terrorism in 1972 was less than that of 1970, while the number of major incidents was about the same for the two years. Incidents with casualties and the number of deaths caused by terrorists were up in 1972. However, it was two particularly shocking incidents in 1972, the Lod Airport massacre in May and the Munich incident in September, that appalled the world and provoked many governments including the United States to undertake more serious measures to combat terrorism.

Similarly, the year 1975 was labeled by many in the news media as the "year of the terrorist." Certainly 1975 seemed to surpass previous years in the number of dramatic and shocking episodes that occurred. There were continued kidnappings in Latin America and in the Middle East, while in Europe two attempts to shoot down airliners at Orly Field in Paris, the kidnapping of a candidate for mayor in West Berlin, the seizure of embassies in Stockholm, Kuala Lumpur and Madrid, the Irish Republican Army's bombing campaign in London, the assassination of the Turkish ambassadors in Austria and France, the hijacking of a train in The Netherlands and the takeover of the Indonesian consulate in Amsterdam, and the seizure of the OPEC oil ministers in Vienna all combined to produce an enormous effect. Certainly, it seemed international terrorism had increased. However, measured by the number of incidents, by the number of major incidents, by the total number of incidents with casualties, and by the total number of casualties, it had in fact declined.

Some observers found encouragement in the seeming "downward trend" in 1976. In fact, however, more incidents of terrorism took place in 1976 and there were more casualties. There were more bombings, more assassinations, and even hijackings went up again after declining in earlier years.

Some continued to perceive a decline in the early months of 1977 but by the end of the year, judging by the number of news articles, television specials, and concern in government, virtually everyone agreed terrorism was on the rise. In fact, it was not. The figures for 1977 indeed show a slight decline.

How do we explain that terrorism often appears to be increasing when it is declining--appears down when it is up? Perhaps we count the wrong things. More likely, the things we can count do not reflect our perceptions of the phenomenon. Terrorism is not simply what terrorists do but the effect--the publicity, the alarm--they create by their actions.

Public perceptions of the level of terrorism in the world appear to be determined then not by the level of violence but rather by the quality of the incidents, the location, and the degree of media

coverage. Hostage incidents seem to have greater impact than murder, barricade situations more than kidnappings. Hostage situations may last for days, possibly weeks. Human life hangs in the balance. The whole world watches and waits. By contrast, a death, even many deaths, are news for only a few days. They lack suspense and are soon forgotten. More people recall the hijacking of a TWA airliner by Croatian extremists in September 1976 than recall the bomb placed aboard a Cubana airliner three weeks later. No one died aboard the TWA airliner (although a policeman was killed attempting to defuse a bomb planted on the ground by the hijackers). Seventy-three persons died in the crash of the Cubana plane.

The location of the incident is also important. Incidents that occur in cities have more impact than those that occur in the countryside. Incidents in Western Europe and North America seem more important, at least to the American public, than incidents in Latin America, Africa, or Asia. It is a matter of communications. An unseen and unheard terrorist incident produces no effect. The network of modern electronic communications laces Western Europe and North America more thoroughly than the rest of the world. We also tend to exhibit a higher tolerance for terrorist violence in the Third World. Terrorist violence in modern industrial societies with democratic governments jars this bias.

Finally, timing is important. Terrorist violence is easily submerged by higher levels of conflict. Individual acts of violence lose their meaning in a war. It is hard to say how many individual acts of terrorism there were during the war in Indochina or how many individual murders, how many kidnappings there were during the civil war in Lebanon. Even a war in another part of the globe can drown out an act of terrorism. There is only so much time and space for news. Terrorist acts themselves in succession produce the effect of a wave of terrorism but must now crowd each other too closely for world attention lest their impact be diluted.

The fact that each terrorist incident is in itself a complete episode--a bomb goes off, an individual is kidnapped and is either released, ransomed, or killed, plus the fact that there are now over

1,000 incidents in Rand's chronology of international terrorism, makes some type of quantitative analysis attractive. If complete chronologies of the terrorism in Argentina, Northern Ireland, Italy, and several other countries that have experienced high levels of terrorist violence were also available, potentially some quantitative analysis could be applied with even greater confidence.

Hostage situations have been examined quantitatively to determine their likely duration, probable outcomes, the risks to the hostages, and even the risks versus payoffs for the hostage-takers. This information has been used in examining the validity of certain policy assumptions and in actually dealing with such episodes.*

Enough airline hijackings occurred to permit the construction of a statistical profile of a typical hijacker, and this was used to reduce the crime.** Some work has also been done in constructing the demographic profile of a "typical terrorist"--a well-educated (although perhaps a university drop-out) male in his early twenties, coming from a middle or upper-class family, the son of a teacher, business executive, or professional, recruited in a university.*** Further analysis may enable us to understand more of his motivations and intentions.

Much more could be done if sufficient data bases were created. At the same time, some cautionary comments are in order. The term terrorism is slippery and also politically loaded. We have seen that it can be difficult to even grossly estimate the level and impact of terrorism by counting the number of incidents. The term "terrorist" is also a loose label applied to political extremists, common

* Brian M. Jenkins, *Numbered Lives: Some Statistical Observations from 77 International Hostage Episodes*, The Rand Corporation, P-5905, July 1977.

** For a discussion of this research, see Evan Pickrel, "Federal Aviation Administration's Behavioral Research Program for Defense Against Hijacking," pp. 19-26, in U.S. Department of Commerce, National Bureau of Standards, *The Role of Behavioral Science in Physical Security: Proceedings of the First Annual Symposium, April 29-30, 1976*, NBS Special Publication 480-24, November 1977.

*** Charles A. Russell and Bowman H. Miller, "Profile of a Terrorist," *Military Review*, August 1977, pp. 21-34.

criminals, and authentic lunatics. Finally, we must recognize that we are dealing with a fast-moving subject. While there seem to be patterns to terrorist activity, we cannot assume that the historical record offers firm footing for predictions.