Terrorism and Political Violence

Francesco Marone

As renowned scholars noted some years ago, "even studies of terrorism and political violence, which implicitly recognize the phenomenon of clandestinity, tend to focus on the visible manifestations of the group, such as resource mobilization, ideologies, and especially violence."[1]

Gilda Zwerman, Patricia G. Steinhoff, and Donatella della Porta, "Disappearing Social Movements: Clandestinity in the Cycle of New Left Protest in the US, Japan, Germany, and Italy," Mobilization: An International Quarterly 5, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 85–104 (85). View all notes

The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations is a welcome addition to the literature on terrorism because it looks inside the black box of the terrorist organization, with a special curiosity for surprisingly "mundane" aspects and details—including al Qaeda's auditing (pp. 31, 49–50 and *passim*), "employment contracts specifying vacation policies" (p. 16), and even "buyout offers" (p. 19) for less committed members.

The author is interested in examining how terrorist groups are organized and particularly how they control their members. The book is divided into nine well-written chapters. Chapter 1 presents two major assumptions. First, in most respects, terrorist groups (including religiously motivated ones) are normal organizations, with problems, strengths, and challenges common to business firms, government agencies, or political parties. Second, terrorist groups are "intendedly rational" because they are able to "match means to ends by explicitly comparing the value of different actions given limited information about the world" (p. 21).

According to Shapiro, all terrorist groups have to deal with an "inescapable" organizational dilemma, the "terrorist's dilemma," indeed: maintaining control over their members while staying covert. In Chapter 2 Shapiro outlines the theoretical framework of the book. Building on the principal-agent theory, he argues that terrorist leaders (the principals) have to delegate certain duties to operatives (the agents). The delegation would pose no problem if all agents were perfectly committed to the cause and shared the same information of their principals. However, in most cases, the preference of leaders and operatives are not completely aligned ("preference divergence"); therefore the operatives can take advantage of the situation to act as they prefer, exploiting the covert nature of terrorism. In terrorist groups agency problems are particularly serious because both monitoring and punishing agents are usually costly and risky. Shapiro is not the first scholar to apply agency theory to rebel and terrorist organizations[2]

The pioneer is probably Sun-Ki Chai, "An Organizational Economics Theory of Antigovernment Violence," Comparative Politics 26, no. 1 (October 1993): 99–110 (cited by Shapiro on 54). View all notes

but his work stands out for breadth and depth of analysis.

The "terrorist's dilemma" creates two fundamental tradeoffs: the first is between operational security and financial efficiency ("security-efficiency tradeoff"), the second between operational

security and tactical control over targeting ("security-control tradeoff"). The extent to which terrorist groups face these tradeoffs depend on four factors: the amount of "preference divergence" within the group, the demand for "discrimination" in the use of violence, the level of "uncertainty" operatives face about what attacks will serve the political goal, and the level of "government security pressure." In other words, these are the independent variables, while the level of control "as outcome" is the dependent variable (pp. 128–130).

In Chapter 3 the author assesses how the challenges of hierarchy and control have played out across different groups. In order to overcome the problem of the relative dearth of data the author decides to use 108 autobiographies and memoirs written by terrorists or former terrorists associated with 40 groups operating from 1880 onwards. For this purpose, he adopts an "intentionally inclusive definition [of terrorist group] that picks up some groups normally thought of as insurgents" (pp. 63–64 and 272). This methodological choice is innovative and promising.[3]

See Mary Beth Altier, John Horgan, and Christian Thoroughgood, "In Their Own Words? Methodological Considerations in the Analysis of Terrorist Autobiographies," Journal of Strategic Security 5, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 85–98. View all notes

The author is aware of some possible biases inherent in the use of this source of data but he argues that they are not relevant for his analysis. Besides, he underlines that "these documents are almost surely biased against reporting the patterns we have been discussing, rather than overstating their prevalence" (p. 64) because, on average, they can be expected to "minimize discussions of intra-organizational strife and discord" and "underreport mundane organizational details" (p. 67). Shapiro shows that agency problems are frequent in terrorist groups and that paperwork and bureaucracy are present in many of them.

Chapter 4 analyzes the operational and financial management of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), drawing on the so-called Sinjar records, a (non-random) sample of internal documents captured by Coalition Forces in northwestern Iraq in 2007 (it is worth noting that Shapiro had the opportunity to collaborate with a team at the West Point Combating Terrorism Center to analyze and release part of the U.S. Department of Defense's Harmony Database: pp. x, 6, and 305–306). The author stresses that the Sinjar records "facilitate a relatively clean, out-of-sample test of several core assumptions and predictions" because they "were unavailable when the theory was developed" (p. 82). Overall, these AQI documents vividly disclose disagreements about tactics and spending, the political value of leaders' control over their subordinates, the relevance of bureaucracy and paperwork, and a trend toward greater bureaucratization over time. In most respects, al Qaeda in Iraq, one of the most prominent terrorist groups of our age, looks like an "ordinary" organization, busy with memos, reports, organization charts, personnel forms, and internal correspondence.

Chapter 5 examines closely the mechanisms behind the agency problems terrorist groups face. On one hand, the author perceptively looks at the moral hazard problem that creates the security-efficiency tradeoff. On the other hand, he studies the security-control tradeoff by means of a game-theoretic model, maybe not clearly necessary, especially for readers unfamiliar with game theory.

Chapters 6 though 8 provide rich evidence of how the "terrorist's dilemma" plays using three well-researched comparative case studies: anarchist and leftist groups (anarchist groups, the Party of the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party) in Tsarist Russia between 1878 and 1909, ethno-nationalist groups (the Provisional IRA, the Ulster Volunteer Force, and the Ulster Defense Association) in Northern Ireland from the 1960s through 2003, and secular and Islamist groups (Fatah and Hamas) in the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict from 1989 to 2005. The groups associated with every within-conflict case clearly differ from each other in terms of one of the key independent variables of the theory: "uncertainty" in Russia, "discrimination" in Northern Ireland, "preference divergence" in Palestine. The three cases, with multiple groups in the same conflict, allow the author to control for other important factors such as the intensity of government security pressure.

The Northern Ireland case displays a noteworthy complication *en passant*. The author notes that the Provisional IRA reorganization in the period 1976–1979 (move to a cellular structure for military operations, introduction of an internal security squad, training in counter-interrogation techniques, and creation of a Northern command with consequent greater functional specialization) "led to a more secure, efficient organization, without a huge drop in control" and admits that "this appears to contradict the framework laid out in Chapters 2 and 3." Shapiro's quick reply to this possible objection is that "the reorganization also entailed the introduction of new organizational technology" and that, however, "such innovations seem relatively rare" in terrorism (pp. 185–186; see also p. 61). The author could elaborate further on this point. What exactly is "new organizational technology"? Is it really "relatively rare" in terrorism? And, ultimately, are the security-control and security-efficiency tradeoffs less inflexible than the author has maintained, precisely because they are influenced by the role of different types of coordination and other organizational devices?

Chapter 9 reviews the evidence and offers a series of concise policy recommendations for how to take advantage of terrorists' organizational vulnerabilities. Furthermore, Shapiro argues that pointing out the "mundane" side of terrorist groups—the banality of evil in terrorist organizations, one might say—helps to "demystify" this threat (pp. 18, 254).

In conclusion, *The Terrorist's Dilemma* is a remarkable work. It draws on a vast amount of literature (including extensive primary source material), is methodologically sound, proposes a stimulating theoretical framework, and profitably combines theory and empirical research. Shapiro's book is a valuable contribution to terrorism studies.

Notes

Gilda Zwerman, Patricia G. Steinhoff, and Donatella della Porta, "Disappearing Social Movements: Clandestinity in the Cycle of New Left Protest in the US, Japan, Germany, and Italy," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 85–104 (85).

The pioneer is probably Sun-Ki Chai, "An Organizational Economics Theory of Antigovernment Violence," *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 1 (October 1993): 99–110 (cited by Shapiro on 54).

See Mary Beth Altier, John Horgan, and Christian Thoroughgood, "In Their Own Words? Methodological Considerations in the Analysis of Terrorist Autobiographies," *Journal of Strategic Security* 5, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 85–98.