

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Terrorism and Strategic Effect: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract: How does terrorism achieve strategic effect? This question has only received limited contemporary consideration despite the expansion and increased sophistication of terrorism studies as a discreet field of inquiry. This article proposes a novel conceptual framework, drawn from the author's PhD dissertation, that seeks to explain how, and the necessary conditions through which, terrorism is able to achieve strategic effects against its adversaries. The proposed framework argues that three elements must be integrated effectively for the achievement of strategic effect: innovative forms of violence, communicative and narrative dynamics, and the exploitation of emergent information and communications technologies. In detailing these elements, this article also suggests that terrorism retains an enduring nature distinct from the changing character of its specific manifestations. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to the underdeveloped conceptual literature that informs terrorism studies, as well as the broader literature on asymmetric warfare strategies.

Keywords: Terrorism; strategy, strategic effect, innovation, narratives, communication

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Introduction

The events in southern Israel on October 7th serve as a reminder of the capacity for terrorism to have significant strategic effects on the adversary towards which it is orientated. Despite the obvious materiel asymmetries between Hamas and Israel, the former was able to not only inflict substantial kinetic impacts, but much more substantially, was able to achieve a series of strategically consequential effects on its targets. In addition to perpetrating the worst single day massacre of Jews since the Holocaust,¹ Hamas has provoked Israel into a drawn out ground war in Gaza, delayed (at best) the normalisation of Israel-Saudi relations, and impacted the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. The Israeli response has mobilised the Axis of Resistance² in ways that continue to reverberate for regional and international security. The strategic effects are ongoing.

This article proposes a novel conceptual framework that aims to provide generalisable explanatory insights in response to the research question *how does terrorism achieve strategic effect?* It provides a brief overview of the orthodox terrorism studies literature, which—in conjunction with primary source terrorist ideology and doctrine—was drawn upon to develop the framework. The proposed framework consists of three necessary elements: innovative forms of violence; communicative and narrative dynamics; and the exploitation of emergent information and communications technology. The article proposes that through the effective integration of these elements, terrorism can achieve strategic effects. Additionally, the framework seeks to evidence an enduring nature and changing character to terrorism praxis, emphasising the continuity of the fundamentals of terrorism, as distinct from the contextually informed character of the specific manifestations of the phenomenon. The framework was applied to three paradigmatic case studies as part of a dissertation. Those case studies constituted:

- *'Anarchist' terrorism from the mid- to late 1800s through the early 1900s,*
- *'Palestinian' motivated terrorism from 1967 onwards, and*
- *the Salafi-Jihadist informed terrorism milieu.*

Understanding the conditions and mechanisms that enable otherwise asymmetrically weak actors to achieve strategic effect is crucial to both ensuring that governments and societies do not react to terrorist operations in the way terrorists desire them to (over)react, but also to understanding the ways in which relatively minor actions can have disproportionately strategic consequences. From a scholarly perspective, the development, application, and validation of the framework contributes to the under-researched conceptual and theoretical component of the terrorism studies literature.

Strategic Effect

A necessary starting point for conceptualising strategic effect in the context of terrorism, and of broader forms of insurgent violence and politics, is the work of Richard English, who distinguished between strategic victory and partial strategic victory.³ This distinction is important, as the concept of strategic effect (as articulated here) does not imply absolute victory or the achievement of the complete and total objectives of the organisation or movement responsible for the action, but rather refers to 'the achievement or partial achievement of

secondary...strategic goals.’⁴ This approach enables a conceptualisation of strategic effect anchored in considerations of strategy that are informed substantially by the literature on asymmetric, or revolutionary warfare. Strategic effect is herein conceptualised as *the capacity to achieve either or both substantial or enduring impacts on an adversary’s strategic decision making and/or on the political dynamics that shape and inform those decision-making processes*.

Despite over two decades of increased output in terrorism studies, there has only been limited engagement with the question of how it is that terrorism has been able, both historically and contemporaneously, to achieve strategic effect. The field, for reasons anchored in the increased operational tempo of counter terrorism post-9/11, has been orientated towards operational and tactical questions, and focused on micro and meso levels of analysis, addressing regional and organisational questions, and tactical and leadership questions, rather than fundamental conceptual issues or the development of generalisable conceptual frameworks. It is necessary to recognise three key characteristics of the terrorism studies literature that inform the development of the conceptual framework.

Firstly, the terrorism studies literature has providence anchored in the analysis of revolutionary warfare and only began to coalesce as a specific field of study in the early 1970s. As Stampnitzky⁵ has identified, the 1972 Munich attacks played a defining role in the formalisation of the field. In its aftermath, governments expanded their policy remit regarding terrorism. Thus, they began to provide demand for scholarly research focused on terrorism. This initial body of work, dominated by scholars such as Laqueur, Jenkins, and Bowyer Bell, remained anchored in the broader body of scholarship oriented towards the study of guerrilla warfare, insurgency, and revolutionary warfare. Additionally, the early terrorism research was driven by what Chenoweth and Moore have referred to as the strategic approach,⁶ shaped and informed by a bounded rationality theoretical framework, which is adopted herein. Throughout the 1970s, numerous foundational texts, such as Bowyer Bell’s *On Revolt: Strategies of National Liberation*⁷ and *The Myth of the Guerrilla*,⁸ Rapoport’s *Assassination & Terrorism*,⁹ and the early works of Chaliand,¹⁰ were published by scholars who had either a background in the analysis of insurgency and counterinsurgency or embraced the strategic approach to the subject. It was in 1972 that the RAND Corporation established its first dedicated terrorism research stream.¹¹ By the late 1970s, texts such as Laqueur’s *Terrorism*,¹² and *Terrorism: A Reader*¹³ had been published, providing foundational conceptual and primary source contributions.

Secondly, it is necessary to recognise that the field has, over time, become vastly more diverse in approach, nuanced, and inherently multi-disciplinary. As Sageman has highlighted, ‘by its nature, the study of terrorism is multidisciplinary, inviting the insights of psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, historians, economists, engineers, and computer scientists.’ The multi-disciplinary nature of the field subsequently informs the approach taken to the development of the framework, whereby three key bodies of terrorism studies literature were drawn on. In addition to a body of primary source material (described below), these three bodies of literature were fundamental to informing the framework and reflected a continuity in the evolving understanding of terrorism, while also seeking to demonstrate the absence of an integrated approach to the question under consideration.

Informed by the field's multidisciplinary nature, the conceptual framework draws on the existing literature across three distinct but related subsets of the 'multidisciplinary' terrorism studies scholarship. The objective was to articulate a conceptual framework that, in addition to identifying the strategic logic of terrorism, also reflects an integrated approach to the existing literature and recognises that while the field is multidisciplinary, there are more commonalities across the literature than fundamental distinctions. The review concentrated on three distinct subfields: literature focused on terrorism and strategy, terrorism and communications, and terrorism and innovation. It identified a lack of integrated analysis across these three subfields as a distinct gap within the literature.

Lastly, it is necessary to note that to the greatest extent possible, the development of the conceptual framework drew on primary sources. This consisted of ideological, strategic, and doctrinal work published by key philosophers, strategists, and ideologues from within, and associated with, the three milieus considered in the case studies, as well as the broader terrorist strategic and ideological ecosystem. Note that given the constraints of this article, only the secondary literature is detailed here, and only the literature on terrorism and strategy is substantially articulated. This is not to suggest that the terrorism and communication literature or the terrorism and innovation literature was less important, but simply that it isn't feasible to include the entirety of the literature reviewed herein.

It is necessary, within the constraints of this article, to recognise the substantive contributions that have been made to the literature that have added to the field's understanding of the mechanisms by which terrorism is able to achieve strategic effect, or more preliminarily, that it is strategic in its intent. Of the foundational terrorism scholars that contributed significantly to understanding the strategy or strategies of terrorism, Crenshaw is one of the most influential. While the early work of Wilkinson,¹⁴ Jenkins¹⁵ and others were crucial to the development of the field and the strategic approach, Crenshaw was the most explicit in addressing the logic and strategy of terrorism. Building from *The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism*¹⁶ in 1972, through 1981's *Causes of Terrorism*¹⁷ and in particular, *The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorism as a Product of Strategic Choice*,¹⁸ Crenshaw consistently sought to articulate the centrality of strategic calculus to terrorism. As is noted in *Logic of Terrorism*, "terrorist activity considered in its entirety shows a fundamental unity of purpose and conception."¹⁹ The analysis undertaken here seeks to identify and articulate this 'fundamental unity of purpose and conception' of terrorism through developing a conceptual framework that models and explains the enduring strategic logic of terrorism.

In addition to the work of Crenshaw, Merari's work is also influential, both generally and regarding this research. *Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency*²⁰ provided a clear overview of the delineations between the various forms of asymmetric struggle and, having argued that terrorism constitutes a unique and discernible manifestation type, emphasised the structural determinants of the strategies adopted by terrorists. Of most direct relevance to the analysis developed here, Merari states, 'it is possible to discern several strategic ideas that terrorists have held as the cardinal practical concept of their struggle'.²¹ The author identified propaganda by the deed, intimidation, provocation, a strategy of chaos, and attrition²² as the primary strategies that terrorists have deployed to achieve effects upon their adversaries.

Post 9/11, the strategically oriented literature incorporated various focus areas, including IS²³ specific operations²⁴ and analysis of specific strategists²⁵ and their strategies.²⁶ In addition, and as a function of collecting and declassifying primary source materials, a small but influential body of work was produced that sought to introduce the concept of jihadi strategic studies.²⁷ This body of literature provided an analysis of the key strategic products of a small cohort of secularly oriented, pragmatic strategists from within the jihadist milieu. Important collections of primary source material were published during this period, which increasingly evidenced strategic considerations within jihadist organisations and included books like *The Canons of Jihad*²⁸ and others²⁹ and the Harmony Program documents translated and published by the Combatting Terrorism Center at Westpoint.³⁰ Of this contemporary literature, Ryan's *Decoding al-Qaeda's Strategy*³¹ and his later monograph, *ISIS: The Terrorist Group That Would Be a State*,³² emphasised the continuity between traditional revolutionary warfare theory and jihadist strategic thought. While remaining focused on jihadist conceptualisations of strategy, these works emphasise the influence and presence of authors such as Mao, Guevara and Giáp in the core strategic thinking of the jihadist movement, and al-Qaeda (AQ) and IS specifically. These works reinforce the continuity of ideas among asymmetric actors regardless of their ideological affinity, historical context, or available technologies.

Briefly, it is prudent to recognise the important and influential works that shaped the framework from beyond the specifically strategic literature. In this regard, the works of Schmid and De Graaf,³³ and ideas expressed in the early works of Jenkins³⁴ and Weimann³⁵ were significant. Equally, in the terrorism and innovation literature, key texts and contributions from authors such as Dolnik,³⁶ and Horowitz,³⁷ as well as the edited collection from Ranstrop and Normark,³⁸ all informed the relevant elements of the framework in equal measure to the previously articulated strategic literature.

Through the consideration of the literature, an integrated response that articulated a generalisable framework for explaining how terrorism can achieve strategic effect was developed. The framework drew on, and sought to integrate, the aforementioned bodies of secondary literature as well as a range of primary source literature. The conceptual framework extends the existing literature regarding the orthodox scholarly understanding of terrorism as a distinct phenomenon. The following section outlines the elements of the framework before providing a more detailed articulation of each. It then proceeds to identify how each of the elements relates to each other and how, when properly integrated, these elements enable terrorism to achieve strategic effect. To the extent possible, this section will also utilise examples from the case studies and beyond, to provide further clarity about the elements of the framework.

The framework endeavours to identify and articulate those elements of terrorism that constitute the enduring nature of the phenomenon, while explaining how it is that terrorism can achieve strategic effect. This aspect of the conceptual framework involves proposing that the elements identified and the interrelationships between them, when evidenced across time and space, constitute the phenomenon's consistent and enduring nature.

The framework itself addresses an otherwise under considered aspect of understanding terrorism from a scholarly perspective. As demonstrated in the literature review, only a limited body of work has sought to identify or describe a general framework for explaining terrorism in detail. While certain authors like Crenshaw³⁹ have provided substantial contributions to the literature in this regard, and authors such as Laqueur and Hoffman⁴⁰ have contributed immensely to understanding the phenomenon on a macro-level of analysis, only very limited work has sought to provide an abstracted articulation of the key necessary elements of the phenomenon that endure across diverse historical and ideological manifestations and are consistently present in cases where terrorism has achieved strategic effect, such as the post-Munich quasi-legitimation of the PLO.⁴¹ This framework proposes that not only is there a strategic logic to terrorism, but that the strategic logic is reflective of the enduring nature of terrorism as a phenomenon and that the key elements of that strategic logic can be identified in numerous case studies across various historical and ideological manifestations. Further, it is proposed here that these elements reflect the strategic logic of terrorism and, when properly integrated, are the key to terrorism being capable of achieving strategic effect.

The Framework

The framework consists of three key elements that identify and explain the strategic logic of terrorism as a phenomenon and proposes that it is the integration of these elements that enables terrorism to have strategic effect. In keeping with the definition provided by Miles et al., the framework identifies ‘the main things to be studied—the key factors, constructs, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them.’⁴²

Each element will be explained in detail below, but of vital importance to the framework is the necessary interrelationships between each. The framework proposes that when these three elements are properly conceived, integrated, and deployed, terrorism can achieve strategic effect. Moreover, it suggests that the presence of each of these elements, and their integration, are necessary for achieving this strategic effect. The absence of one of these elements, or the failure to properly integrate them, will result in the inability to achieve strategic effect. In highlighting the integration of the three elements, the framework seeks to emphasise the need for each of the elements to be considered and interwoven within the operational planning process. By this, the framework seeks to demonstrate a relationship of interdependent necessity between the elements, whereby the deployment (for example) of innovative violence independent of considerations regarding communicative and narrative dynamics and the exploitation of emergent information and communications technology would be insufficiently calibrated for the achievement of strategic effect. The framework suggests that it is through the integration of these elements that the amplification of effect occurs, as well as the resultant disproportionate strategic effects.

Innovative Forms of Violence

The first element of the framework focuses on the forms of violence deployed by terrorist organisations and the need for this violence to be innovative. It is evidenced most frequently and directly in the tactical choices and targeting decisions of terrorist organisations. For the purposes of the framework, this encompasses a range of manifestations of innovation and can

include both internal and external innovation, revolutionary and iterative innovations, and can include innovations related to broader issues of strategy and organisational structure, including the ways this can facilitate the deployment of new tactics or new targeting decisions. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully articulate each of these types of innovation in detail, however each is articulated below with reference to an example. Innovative forms of violence include:

a. internal innovation, innovations developed and deployed within a terrorist organisation or within the broader movement and its support networks, for example the development of vehicle borne suicide improvised explosive devices by Hezbollah in the early 1980s;⁴³

b. external innovation, the adoption of innovations developed external to the terrorist organisation, such as the embrace of vehicle borne suicide operations by AQ, via their engagement with Hezbollah;⁴⁴

c. revolutionary innovation, innovations that fundamentally alter the tactical or targeting options of a terrorist organisation, as demonstrated by the exploitation of the invention of dynamite by Irish Fenians and Anarchists in the late 1800s;⁴⁵

d. incremental innovation, the innovative application of existing tactical capabilities or innovation regarding targeting decisions or the implementation of incremental changes to existing tactical practices, such as Khaled Sheik Mohammed's incremental change to conventional plane hijacking;⁴⁶

e. structural innovation, innovations regarding organisational structure that result in changes in tactical or targeting determinations, such as the operationalisation of the strategic and organisational concepts of Abu Musab al-Suri and the facilitation of Western lone actor terrorism;⁴⁷

f. strategic innovation, innovations in strategic approach or strategic objective that enables new tactical or targeting opportunities, exemplified by both the strategic repositioning of the Palestinian struggle in the context of Third Worldist struggles,⁴⁸ and the prioritisation of the Far Enemy by AQ in the aftermath of the Afghan-Soviet War;⁴⁹

g. communicative innovation, innovations in relation to the framing or presentation of terrorist violence, as per the 'beheading video' phenomenon manifested by Islamic State (IS).⁵⁰

Communicative and Narrative Dynamics

Since its modern inception in the mid-1800s, terrorism has been conceived by its perpetrators as a communicative act, designed to propagate an ideological or political proposition that was otherwise unable to obtain sufficient exposure to be consumed by the target audience. The frustrations of the earliest philosophers and strategists of 'propaganda of the deed' compelled them to deploy violence as an explicit effort to demand the attention of the press, the public, and the political apparatus, in hopes of mobilising the broader community towards revolution. Terrorism is thus an inherently communicative action, and the achievement of strategic effect requires an intrinsic appreciation and consideration of this dynamic and its incorporation into the operational planning and design of terrorism actions and campaigns. In a contemporary

context, senior terrorist leaders such as Ayman al-Zawahiri explicitly expressed the centrality of communication and media to the struggle in which his organisation remains engaged. In 2005, he wrote to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and stated, 'I say to you: that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media'.⁵¹ Further evidence of the centrality of media and communications strategies at the core of terrorist considerations is found in the comments of Abu Daoud, considered by many as the mastermind of the 1972 Munich Massacre. Speaking with journalists at the time of the release of the 2006 film *Munich*, he declared:

*Before Munich, we were simply terrorists. After Munich, at least people started asking who are these terrorists? What do they want? Before Munich, nobody had the slightest idea about Palestine ... People were more interested in sports than in the plight of the Palestinians ... In one sense, we succeeded in Munich: we forced our cause on to the television screens of 500 million households.*⁵²

The following section will expand on this element of the framework with an articulation of how communicative and narrative considerations manifest themselves in tactical and targeting decision-making before providing an analysis of the necessary role that narrative establishment and narrative reinforcement plays in the ongoing efforts of terrorist organisations to achieve strategic effect. The focus here is on the communication embedded within the violent acts that constitute terrorism, and propaganda production by terrorist organisations, rather than on the exploitation of a specific information and communication technology.

Analysis of terrorism has long recognised the importance of the theatrical aspect⁵³ and the associated performative nature of the violence. The first and most direct way to understand the importance and centrality of this element of terrorism is by recognising the indirect nature of terrorist violence and the broader family of asymmetric violence. Arreguin-Toft articulates the distinction between direct and indirect strategies succinctly; he states, 'direct approaches target an adversary's armed forces in order to destroy that adversary's capacity to fight. Indirect approaches seek to destroy an adversary's will to fight.'⁵⁴

In targeting an adversary's 'will to fight,' terrorism constitutes an indirect or asymmetric strategy that seeks to influence the willingness of an adversary or its supporting constituencies to continue to resist the objectives of the terrorist organisation. This necessarily requires a component of effort that focuses on the mindset of the target and thus requires consideration of the communicative dynamics associated with any violence undertaken.

Both Schmid⁵⁵ and Ganor⁵⁶ conceive terrorism as a manifestation of psychological warfare, reinforcing the necessary influence and persuasion aspects of the phenomenon. For terrorism to be capable of influencing and persuading audiences, it is necessary that appropriate consideration be given of its performative aspects. This can be analysed by distinguishing between the aspects of terrorism that are under the control of the perpetrator, such as target selection and choice of tactic, and those that are dependent on the audiences and targets of terrorism. This dynamic relationship between the intended effects of terrorism and its impact on its target audience is essential to determining whether strategic effect can be achieved.

Ganor articulates this core logic of terrorist calculus:

The attack usually causes limited physical damage...its explosive echo grows in volume as it is amplified by the media; the message conveyed by the attack is sharpened and magnified. A terrorist attack is intended to influence public opinion. Its message is really a combination of three different messages aimed at three different audiences: the people whom the terrorists claim to represent, the targeted population, and lastly, the international community.⁵⁷

To understand how communicative and narrative dynamics manifest, it is necessary to delineate between *propaganda* in the strict sense and *propaganda of the deed* or violent terrorist actions designed to achieve propagandistic effects. Terrorist organisations seek to maintain the production and distribution of both types of outputs. However, it is possible to distinguish, for example, between ideological or philosophical tracts that advocate the political or religious justifications for terrorist violence⁵⁸ and indigenously produced videos of terrorist actions or news coverage of terrorist incidents. The former reflects a traditional understanding of propaganda, whereas the latter is propaganda of the deed—an explicit attempt to exploit calibrated violence for propagandistic effects or to weaponise communication.

For the purposes of the framework, communicative and narrative dynamics is conceived of as *the intentional embedding of ideology, through either explicit or symbolic components, into the conceptualisation and production of either conventional propaganda, or terrorist actions undertaken for propagandistic effect*. The 2014 *Message to America* video released by IS provides an ideal demonstration of how this is undertaken and how it can achieve strategic effect when undertaken in a refined and sophisticated manner. The incorporation of numerous symbolic components into that video underpinned its capacity to achieve strategic effects. Dressing the victim in an orange jumpsuit, and the English accent of the perpetrator, served to enable a global spectacle, as described by Friis:

During the autumn of 2014, screen-grabs from a number of beheading videos, produced by al-Furqān Media, were shown repeatedly across various media platforms, establishing the images of the kneeling, orange-clad hostages next to the black-clad executioner 'Jihadi John' as 'instant icons' and almost unavoidable topics in public debates about contemporary security threats.⁵⁹

The broader body of nonviolent propaganda produced by terrorist organisations plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining context and in creating and reinforcing narratives that further contextualise the violence of terrorist actions. This contextualisation and narrative development empowers terrorist violence, providing it with meaning and power. In the absence of narrative context, terrorist actions have only limited capacity to communicate the ideological propositions in support of which they are undertaken and lack any meaningful capacity to reach their desired audiences in meaningful ways.

A sustained communications strategy is required to establish and maintain this narrative

context for violence. A terrorist organisation and its broader social movement must establish the basic parameters of their grievance and, by extension, the justification for their violence. In doing this, it is also necessary for the violence itself, particularly as an extension of its innovative character, to be understood by the relevant audiences and begin establishing itself as a relatable component of public discourse. Verhoeven makes a crucial point in this regard when she discusses the first attempt on the life of the Russian Tsar by Dmitry Karakzaov in 1866, some 15 years prior to his successful assassination by Narodnaya Volya in 1881. In discussing what she refers to as the ‘prologue of terrorism,’ she states:

...Narodnaia Volia's terrorism shocked everyone, of course, but it surprised no one. Bizarre, to say the least, that a radically new political phenomenon can come into being, yet immediately seem not only intelligible, but even self-evident. So self-evident, in fact, that within a year, Dostoevsky could suggest to his editor...that for anyone seeking the truth in modern Russia, the path from religion to revolutionary terrorism was natural. In short, contemporaries...reacted to the emergence of terrorism as if the idea of terrorism had already been there.⁶⁰

What Karakozov and other revolutionaries during the period until 1881 had achieved—through multiple assassination attempts, the distribution of conventional propaganda and the other various outreach efforts of the broader revolutionary movement—was to make the actions of Narodnaya Volya coherent and understandable to the public and the various specific audiences they sought to influence. In the process, these activities created and refined a narrative that meant that the ultimate actions of Narodnaya Volya were perceived ‘as if the idea had already been there.’

A similar narrative contextualisation can be seen in the ‘lone jihad’ campaign promoted by IS from 2014 onwards. This specific campaign, primarily targeted at potential Western operatives, encouraged individuals to undertake low capability terrorist attacks using unsophisticated and readily available weaponry such as stabbings and vehicle ramming. While embedded within the broader, well-established jihadist narrative and the general IS narrative, and earlier lone jihad campaigns⁶¹ this campaign celebrated lone-actor terrorism, promoted specific tactics and targets and provided strategic and theological endorsement of the activities.⁶² In doing so, these attacks relied on the established narrative that an act that involved these specific forms of violence would be likely interpreted as an act of terrorism in a Western jurisdiction. Since at least 2001, the establishment and reinforcement of a narrative surrounding jihadist terrorism through media coverage and popular culture has enabled organisations like IS to deploy rudimentary manifestations of violence and contextualise and embed meaning in them by exploiting an established narrative. In doing so, achieved a grossly disproportionate effects on their adversaries.⁶³

Distinct from the communicative dynamics articulated above, the narrative dynamics of a terrorist action refers to *the conceptualisation and production of terrorist propaganda or terrorist actions undertaken for propagandistic effect, with the intention of establishing or reinforcing an ideologically informed narrative context.* This process enables potential recruits, the public (usually consuming mediated representations of these actions) and governments to interpret and understand the purpose of the actions and the meaning embedded within. It is important to recognise the limitations of the communicative dynamic’s aspect of the

element. Archetti has referred to the fact that ‘messages are not simply transmitted, but they are constantly reinterpreted.’⁶⁴ Audiences retain substantial agency in their interpretation of the communicative and narrative dynamics of terrorist actions. The focus here is primarily on how terrorist organisations conceive and deploy these efforts and how these can achieve strategic effects. Ensuring narrative coherency enables audiences to understand terrorism in the manner intended.

Emerging Information and Communications Technology

This element of the framework refers to *the exploitation of emergent forms of information and communication technology, which have sufficiently diffused to have shaped and informed the relevant cultural and social practices associated with them*. Understanding the importance of the cultural and social practices and norms that develop as a function of the evolution of information and communications technology is essential to understanding how integral these technologies are to terrorism and its capacity to achieve strategic effect.

This broader conceptualisation of information and communications technology refers, for example, to the emergence of the newspaper industry *and* the associated commercialisation and industrialisation of the print media, how this drove the expansion of literacy, and, in turn, the emergence of the production and consumption of popular literature. Russian anarchist terrorism and the subsequent European and American manifestations of anarchist terrorism, depended on not just the industrialisation of the printing press but on the emergence of a news industry to recount their actions, on affordable printing technologies and the growth in literacy to spread their ideology and associated manuals and operational knowledge. As Patyk states ‘literary and popular fiction have participated in the mediatisation that is said to be the hallmark of modern terrorism.’⁶⁵ Understanding and exploiting this broader body of public cultural practice must be reflected in the approach of terrorists towards their actions to enable the successful comprehension of their ideologically embedded violence.

At each stage of the various modern information and communications technology transformations,⁶⁶ cultural practices have been directly and indirectly impacted. In the direct sense, new information and communications technologies have enabled a variety of innovations in command and control and the production and distribution of propaganda in support of either the war efforts of states or the ‘resistance’ efforts of terrorists and insurgents. Terrorists and those lacking the means to directly confront their adversaries have been required to embrace new information and communications technologies as part of their efforts to indirectly affect them or exploit these technologies to seek to shape the perception of the conflict or the actors and their legitimacy. These efforts have depended as much on the commercialisation of those technologies and their eventual diffusion and dominance of news consumption practices as it has with the adoption and exploitation of them by terrorists and others.

The exploitation of information and communication technologies has also been a cumulative practice inasmuch as it has resulted in the addition of emerging technologies to the arsenal of terrorists rather than wholesale substitution. Terrorists retain effective technological capabilities rather than abandoning them when a new technology emerges. In this sense, terrorist organisations tend to exploit newer technologies by, in part, incorporating them into

their existing technological repertoire. This can mean potentially distributing content designed for a previously dominant technology through new technological platforms or capabilities. As an example, Baele identifies how:

...IS has developed a sophisticated and exceptionally extensive propaganda system inherently linked to its actions; it has disseminated photographs; published magazines in several languages, as well as newspapers, books, and pamphlets; recorded music and speeches; broadcasted radio programs; produced short and long videos; designed infographics; created and alimented closed discussion spaces on the Internet; stimulated social media activity; organized permanent and temporary 'information' points in controlled territory; and developed smart-phone applications and even educational e-games for children.⁶⁷

Crucial to assessing a particular technology as worthy of consideration as a distribution channel is an assessment as to the sufficient diffusion of that technology. Said technology necessarily needs to have become a predominant platform for the target audiences of the terrorist propaganda or the terrorist action and its mediated representation. As terrorism has evolved, achieving narrative dominance or, at the very least, narrative disruption, has required more than simply producing content and distributing it via appropriate platforms. Rather, the content and the communicative and narrative dynamics must be highly calibrated to ensure a level of coerced coverage by news outlets. Incidents such as 9/11 and 'products' such as the *Message to America* video successfully achieved this in a manner commensurate with the technologies available at the time. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, while lacking the live coverage dynamics of 9/11 or the 24-hour release-to-response time from the target government of *Message to America*, still succeeded in gaining global coverage in the dominant media form of the day. By 14 March, only 24 hours later, the otherwise obscure West Virginian newspaper, *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, was reporting on the assassination of the Tsar.⁶⁸

Integration

Essential to the achievement of strategic effect through the above-identified elements is the integration of each element and the proper calibration of all actions undertaken by a terrorist organisation to ensure that each element is given proper consideration. This aspect of the framework, while less explicit than the three primary elements, is a crucial variable in ensuring the effectiveness of terrorist action.

Integration, in this context, relates to the need to consider all three elements of the framework: as independent variables and in the way they reinforce each other. Again, the *Message to America* video is instructive. The violence itself, namely the beheading, was a crucial component of the overall effectiveness of the release, which the US Deputy National Security Advisor referred to as a 'terrorist attack'.⁶⁹ However, the power and strategic impact of the video was dependent on the further calibration of the entire 'product' that was the video, in empowering an ancient form of violence and transforming it into an innovative and highly calibrated act. In this sense, the communicative and narrative dynamics of the video were unambiguously calibrated to speak to numerous audiences.

The act of the beheading itself communicated to those sympathetic audiences familiar with the

longer history of beheading videos within jihadist discourse, dating to the earliest Chechnyan outputs⁷⁰ and explicitly referenced *Sheikh Abu Musab Zarqawi Slays an American infidel*,⁷¹ the 2004 beheading video of Nicholas Berg, made globally available online via an 'Ansar Al-Islam web site'.⁷² The video was contextualised within an existing narrative, which enhanced its capacity for interpretation by those audiences. Further, the gruesome nature of the violence was designed to demand media attention from Western audiences and media outlets. The victim was adorned in an orange jumpsuit, a direct reference to the uniforms of those held at Guantanamo Bay.⁷³ The lead role of Mohammed Emwazi, or *Jihadi John* as he was dubbed in the Western media, with his 'distinct and confident London street accent',⁷⁴ served to further strengthen the power of the video release and communicate the globality of IS and its appeal. By directly contextualising the action within existing Western political discourse, the violence, itself already powerful in its brutality, became both interpretable and contextualised within existing narratives of jihad regarding the 'previous' Iraq War, the conflict in Syria and the expansion of IS. By situating the beheading within a broader context that referenced not only excesses such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay but also previous beheadings such as those of Nicholas Berg and Daniel Pearl,⁷⁵ the impact and effectiveness of the product was further strengthened. Last, the video's distribution format was equally instrumental in enabling strategic effect.

Initially distributed via the social networking platform Diaspora,⁷⁶ *Message to America's* global reach and impact were shaped as much by its content as by its distribution and the mechanism by which IS exploited emergent technologies⁷⁷ and, in turn, existing mass media. Reflecting the penetrative capacity of highly calibrated and choreographed violent content such as *Message to America*, Redmond et al. have noted that most 'news organizations made the decision to shield viewers from the gruesomeness of the video by sharing only screen grabs, [this] may have paradoxically increased interest in the video'.⁷⁸ Regardless of censoring the reproduction and rebroadcasting of the explicit content, institutionalised media outlets were necessarily forced to quote the "Islamic State" as a valid source of information. This was an outcome of 'ISIL's larger strategy of imposing and communicating its political and religious agenda on and through global media institutions, and ultimately, world governments'.⁷⁹

Only when all three of these elements are integrated within a specific terrorist act is the potential for strategic effect maximised. The presence of a strategy underpinning the deployment of these types of choreographed acts further supports the proposition that there is, explicitly or otherwise, strategic calculus and strategic intent by terrorist actors. In the case of IS, by 2016, it was publishing and distributing specific media strategies and exhorting its supporters and operatives that,

*the media jihad against the enemy is no less important than the material fight against it. Moreover, your media efforts are considered to be among the many great forms of the rite of jihad.*⁸⁰

At their most hyperbolic, they went as far as to state, 'it is no exaggeration to say that the media operative is an *istishhadi* [suicide bomber] without a belt!'⁸¹ Highly calibrated outputs such as *Message to America* can achieve enhanced and disproportionate impacts. With its careful selection of violent methods, choreographed communicative and narrative signifiers and effective distribution to multiple audiences, within less than 24 hours of its release, the US

President held a press conference. Within months, airstrikes were being launched in Syria and Iraq. Sella notes that,

*...virtually no one, anywhere on the political spectrum, denies that the James Foley video changed everything. The beheading seared into our minds, led us to dark rooms of our national psyche, rooms that are better left bricked over. And a picture is worth a thousand troops.*⁸²

Conclusion

This article has outlined a preliminary articulation of a novel conceptual framework that seeks to provide generalisable insights regarding the question of how terrorism achieves strategic effects. It identified three necessary elements—namely *innovative forms of violence*, *communicative and narrative dynamics*, and the *exploitation of emergent information and communication technologies*—which, when integrated, underpin the capacity of terrorism to achieve substantial or enduring impacts on an adversary's strategic decision making and/or on the political dynamics that shape and inform those decision-making processes.

As with any preliminary articulation of a conceptual framework, this necessarily has limitations. Areas warranting further analysis include the temporal or campaign aspects of the achievement of strategic effect. This would incorporate analysis of how narrative development over time contributed to the capacity to achieve strategic objectives, and how the ongoing refinement and calibration of the tactical and targeting decisions of terrorist organisations was necessary to achieve strategic impact. Additionally, the conceptual framework was enemy centric, in that it concentrated exclusively on the strategic logic of the terrorist organisation or movement rather than the dynamic interplay between terrorism and counter terrorism. Further research on the impact of counter terrorism decision making, and strategic logic, would likely strengthen the applicability and explanatory power of the framework.

Beyond providing insight into the strategic effects of terrorism, the framework also has potential applicability for assisting in calibrating and estimating the effects of violence or other direct actions undertaken by nation states in an irregular or unconventional warfare context. As the international security agenda continues to prioritise great power competition, understanding the mechanisms by which an actor can achieve strategic effect with minimal resources, below the threshold of war, can be of significant assistance to special operations capabilities, militaries, intelligence services, and other aspects of the national security apparatus.

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