

DOMESTIC, INTERNATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL TERROR AFTER 2001: TOWARDS A NEW TYPOLOGY?

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the traditional distinction between domestic and international terrorism, and the blurring of these two types. The latter trend emerged in 2005 when the United States official annual global terror statistics included acts of domestic terror, whereas the focus had previously predominantly been on international terror incidents. Some of the implications of these changes in the statistical database, as well as the developing concept of 'transnational terrorism', are discussed and analysed.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main typologies of terrorism has been based on the distinction between domestic and international terrorism. Statistics on annual incidents of global terror, compiled by the United States (US) State Department, maintained this distinction and reported primarily on incidents of international terror. However, since 2005, official US terror statistics now also include 'significant' incidents of domestic terror. This has led to criticism that an important distinction, namely that between international and domestic terror has now become blurred.

The increasing usage of the concept of 'transnational terrorism' represents a further development in the typology of terrorism. Subsequently, the question is firstly whether this is in fact a 'new' form of terrorism and, secondly, whether it is clearly distinguishable

from domestic or international terror, or whether it presents a hybrid version combining elements of both.

This article discusses and analyses the aforesaid developments and the implications thereof for both the statistical measurement of terrorist incidents and for counter-terror measures.

2. THE VARIOUS LEVELS OF TERROR: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Three levels of terrorism can be distinguished based on objectives, targeting and geography, namely domestic terror, international terror and transnational terror. The basic distinction between domestic terrorism, on the one hand, and international terrorism, on the other hand, is in a way deceptively simple. Many acts of domestic terrorism have international consequences, and in many cases domestic groups targeting national targets only, receive some form of international support or attempt to achieve international publicity.

Classifying various forms of international terrorism also assists in distinguishing it from domestic terrorism. The following categorisation is suggested:

- International terrorism as part of a broader domestic insurgency or manifesting largely as 'pure' international terror.
- International terrorism conducted by autonomous non-state actors (groups or individuals).
- State-sponsored international terrorism conducted by people controlled by a sovereign state.
- International terrorism conducted by a state using its own agents for this purpose.

Jenkins concludes that international terrorism comprises those terrorist incidents that have clear international consequences, namely incidents in which terrorists go abroad to strike their targets; or stay at home but select victims because of their connections to a foreign state, for example, diplomats or executives of foreign corporations; or attack international lines of communication, for example airlines.¹⁾

The *US Code, Title 22*, contains the following definition relat-

ing to terrorism and international terrorism:

- The term 'terrorism' means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.
- The term 'international terrorism' means terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country.
- The term 'terrorist group' means any group practicing international terrorism or any group with significant subgroups that practice international terrorism.²⁾

International terrorism, as is the case with domestic terrorism, is normally associated with attacks on civilians (non-combatants). The following has been added as a qualification by the US Department of State, although it may be too broad a view:³⁾

(T)he term "non-combatant" is interpreted to include, in addition to civilians, military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed or not on duty ... We also consider as acts of terrorism attacks on military installations or on armed military personnel when a state of military hostilities does not exist on the site ...

The traditional definition of international terrorism, specifically in the US, has on occasion been questioned due to contemporary developments. For example, the criterion of violence in the definition tends not to cover the disabling of a national infrastructure caused by sabotage in the form of a computer virus, and the link between terrorism and politically motivated behaviour may exclude certain acts that are deemed to be terrorist in nature but with a criminal motive.⁴⁾

Some acts, such as aircraft hijacking, are already included in certain international conventions, regardless of the motive. The US State Department does not seem to distinguish between terrorism proper, namely the intimidation, wounding or killing of persons, and other events such as sabotage, where the intention to kill or maim may be absent. It lists all of these incidents, which are annually recorded, as acts of international terror, although some of these clearly indicate damage to property alone.

In some views, if the intention to maim or kill is absent, even if there is a loss of life, it still does not constitute terrorism, as the saboteurs did not intend to maim or kill.⁵⁾ It has also been argued that the US definition of a terrorist group has the disadvantage of excluding individual terrorist activity.⁶⁾

The concepts of international and transnational terrorism have largely been used as synonyms, or transnational terrorism has, until relatively recently, been viewed as a specific variant of international terrorism. In the latter context it has for instance been used to refer to terrorists who operate internationally with the express long-term aim of global revolution or of establishing a revolutionary supranational world order. It can also refer to co-operation between various groups of individuals in different countries.⁷⁾

In 2005, the US State Department argued that there was no statutory guidance regarding the definition of transnational terror, and that the current transnational terrorism is based on decentralised local groups loosely affiliated or inspired by the Islamist ideology espoused by al-Qaida.⁸⁾ In this sense, a specific act of terrorism could be domestic (in terms of targeting) and not international, but still viewed as transnational.

The United Nations (UN) resolutions on terrorism still tend to emphasise international terrorism specifically, although they do refer to the combating of all forms of terrorism. As in the case of terrorism in general, there is still no universally accepted UN definition of international terrorism, and no specific reference to transnational terrorism. However, a Security Council resolution of 2006 did emphasise the essentially transnational character of al-Qaida, by "noting with concern the changing nature of the threat that al-Qaida, Usama bin Laden, and the Taliban, and other individual groups, undertakings and entities associated with them represent to international peace and security".⁹⁾

3. THE CURRENT CONCEPT OF TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

The development of al-Qaida style terrorism increasingly led to a more specific focus on 'transnational terrorism', as one of the characteristics of what was, in some views, a 'new' form of terrorism (not

bound by national ties, and consisting of loosely organised networks). Others, however, argued that this was in fact not so 'new' after all, and that traditional terrorists had also operated transnationally (for example joint training facilities for various organisations previously in Libya), and in certain cases also established networks instead of hierarchically-based organisations. Similarly, where it is argued that the concept of a 'global jihadist' movement specifically characterises transnational terrorism as opposed to more traditional terrorism, it could be counter-argued that traditional Marxist-inspired movements had the same goals.¹⁰⁾

Pressman, in an attempt to place transnational terror in a current context and specifically as embodied in the al-Qaida movement, distinguishes between national and transnational terrorist groups. The main distinction, according to this view, is that national objectives are linked to a specific state, while this is not the case with transnational organisations. It is therefore a question of geographic context, and if the national territorial home or objective linked to this disappears, the organisation would lose its reason for existing. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam in Sri Lanka (a separatist movement) would be a case in point. A national organisation may 'use the world as a stage' (in other words also commit acts of international and not only domestic terror), but these would still serve the purpose of serving specific national (geographic) objectives.¹¹⁾

In contrast, the objectives of transnational terrorists are not linked to a single state. Al-Qaida is currently the prime example of a movement that has regional as well as global aspirations, such as uniting all Muslims and establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate; to eliminate US and Western presence in Muslim countries; and to eradicate heretic Muslim governments.¹²⁾

Transnational groups may be based in various countries, either simultaneously or sequentially, for purposes of fundraising, recruitment and training. Transnational activities have also been facilitated by globalisation and new technologies. The lack of a specific state-linked objective, also implies that transnational terror groups are more likely to become involved in indiscriminate mass casualty attacks, as they are less concerned about alienating third parties than is the case with national terror groups.¹³⁾

Some similarities between national and transnational terror groups include the fact that both may adopt extreme ideologies

(Hamas is viewed by many as being radical), and that both types of groups may at times seek state sponsorship. However, transnational organisations could absorb the loss of state support more readily than national groups. The main example of this has been al-Qaida's ability to survive the loss of state support in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁾

Wiktorowicz refers to the new global threat to US security as a tendency within a broad transnational "Salafi movement, who advocate a return to the fundamentals of the Muslim religion".¹⁵⁾ In the US *Country Reports on Terrorism 2006*, the following is stated regarding the concept of transnational terrorism:¹⁶⁾

The surface events mentioned above highlight a deeper trend: the transformation of international terrorism from the traditional forms that Congress intended to address when it established the annual *Country Reports* series into a broader, multifarious approach to transnational non-state warfare that now resembles a form of global insurgency. We have entered a new era of conflict that may demand new paradigms and different responses from those of previous eras.

AQ and its core leadership group represent a global action network that seeks to aggregate and exploit the effects of widely dispersed, semi-independent actors. It openly describes itself as a transnational guerrilla movement and applies classic insurgent strategies at the global level. AQ applies terrorism, but also subversion, propaganda, and open warfare, and it seeks weapons of mass destruction in order to inflict the maximum possible damage on its opponents. It links and exploits a wider, more nebulous community of regional, national, and local actors who share some of its objectives, but also pursue their own local agendas. Finally, it works through regional and cross-border safe havens that facilitate its actions while hampering government responses.

In its classification of terrorist organisations, the US Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism continues to use the two-fold categorisation of "foreign terrorist organizations" (including, for instance, Hizaballah and al-Qaida) and "other groups of concern" such as the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. The first category contains organisations that the US Secretary of State is authorised to designate as such, due to the fact that they conduct international terrorism and

threaten US interests. Designation enables the US government to freeze assets in US financial institutions, makes material support for these groups a criminal offence, and prevents visas from being issued to members of these groups. The second category consists of organisations which are involved in domestic and/or international terror. No distinction between international and transnational terrorist groups is therefore made in the current US classification of terrorist groups.¹⁷⁾

4. THE BLURRING OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

On the occasion of the release of the US Department of State *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004*, the interim Director of the US National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), John Brennan, stated with regard to the distinction between domestic and international terrorism that the distinction could hinge on the presence of only one foreign national at the target. The example of two Chechen suicide bombers blowing up two Aeroflot flights in 2004, one containing only Russian citizens and the other an Israeli national, was mentioned as a case in point. The former is classified as domestic terror, the latter as international terror. In Brennan's view, the statutory classification of international terrorism is therefore somewhat problematic in the above types of incidents. He concluded that "our intent is to capture any incident where a non-combatant is targeted or indiscriminately attacked and the attack is politically motivated". The NCTC has also questioned the traditional definition of international terrorism as defined in the *US Code*, stating that it was appropriate for state-sponsored terrorism, but not for transnational terrorism.¹⁸⁾

That this may be an overly ambitious undertaking, especially since it seems to include all acts of domestic terrorism as well, leaves little doubt. Even as far as international terrorist incidents are concerned, only 'significant' incidents have traditionally been recorded by the US. These include incidents involving kidnapping, killing or wounding of non-combatants (unless injuries were minor). Other incidents regarded as 'significant' were those resulting in physical or economic damage of approximately US\$10 000 or more.¹⁹⁾

The approach of the NCTC regarding statistical data relating to terrorist incidents, and which replaced the statistics previously supplied by the annual Country Reports issued by the US State Department (*Patterns of Global Terrorism*), has been subjected to further criticism relating to the criteria for including incidents as terror incidents. "The list may be more comprehensive, but it is less meaningful".²⁰⁾

With regard to the distinction between domestic and international terrorism, it was also stated with reference to the NCTC statistics that:²¹⁾

Another issue concerns the distinction between international and domestic terrorism. International terrorism has historically meant acts involving citizens or property of two or more states. The distinction, though sometimes difficult to make in practice, is often of analytical and policy importance. One could argue that foreign governments are responsible for preventing and policing purely domestic terrorist attacks, while the U.S. government has a particular interest in international terrorist incidents, as they may affect Americans. The earlier State Department data, which were seriously flawed and not nearly as comprehensive nor transparent as the WITS data, only included international terrorist incidents. I believe the WITS data would be strengthened if a flag were added allowing users to restrict their sample to international incidents.

The result of the change in the statistical database, to include both domestic and international terrorism, has obviously also resulted in a situation where it is difficult to compare any pre-2005 incidents of global terrorism with incidents occurring from 2005 onwards, as the former contained only incidents of international terrorism. It is still (theoretically) possible to deduce the number of international incidents from the NCTC statistics for 2005 and onwards, but these are not separately categorised. The number of international terror incidents recorded for 2003, for instance, totalled 208, while the 'world-wide' incidents recorded in 2005, amounted to 11 153.²²⁾ The Rand Corporation calculated that only about 301 of the 2005 incidents represented international terrorist attacks.²³⁾ In fact, the change had already started in 2004 when the NCTC started including incidents which arguably seem to be of a clear domestic nature, as part of its

international terror statistics (total 651 as opposed to the RAND Corporation's calculation of 396), only to jettison the distinction totally in 2005.²⁴⁾

5. CONCLUSION

While the concept of 'transnational terror', which has increasingly been used with specific reference to al-Qaida, seems to denote a new typology of terrorism, in addition to domestic and international terrorism, it obviously carries certain characteristics of both the existing categories. Transnational terror is mainly distinguished from international terror in terms of the fact that the latter has objectives deemed to be linked to a specific geographic entity (the national framework), whereas transnational terror does not have this specific link in terms of objectives or as far as state support is concerned. Both international terror groups and transnational terror groups predominantly target foreigners or foreign property, but domestic targets are at times also attacked. An incident whereby a local group attacks a domestic target (with no foreigners or foreign property involved), but claiming to do it in the name of al-Qaida, may therefore well fall within the ambit of 'transnational' terror.

The main implications of the developing concept of transnational terrorism obviously lies in recognising the resemblances to, but also the differences from the more conventional 'international terrorism'. The real significance does, however, also seem to reside in the specific approach to countering transnational terrorism. In this regard it has been noted that the "standard tools of sanctions, negotiations, democratization, poverty remediation and deterrence decrease in value when their target is not limited to a single state". As far as negotiations specifically are concerned, it has been stated that these are not an option because the goal of transnational terrorism is so expansive.²⁵⁾

While not falling within the scope of this article, it does therefore seem that while the basic classical principles of counter-insurgency remain valid, developments such as the current primarily urban dimension of terrorism (as in the case of Iraq), and the phenomenon of 'transnational' terror, clearly indicate that counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism need to be adapted on both the policy and strategic levels.

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