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**SOF and a Theory of  
Modern Terrorism**

by

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**On the cover:** The flag is lowered to half-staff at the Pentagon 9/11 Memorial during a Remembrance Ceremony on September 11, 2015, to honor those killed in the terrorist attack. Source: Senior Master Sgt. Adrian Cadiz, Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs.

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# SOF AND A THEORY OF MODERN TERRORISM

Loosely labelled as ‘terrorism studies,’ much about terrorism has been learned through experience and research. Members of academia, think tanks, and the policy and security professions have contributed to a wide-ranging analysis and commentary on various aspects of terrorism they find of interest. Most of these contributions are useful and constructive, and some of them are contradictory. Military doctrine writers have taken advantage of this renaissance to continually improve doctrine. Policymakers and strategists have also selectively mined these resources.<sup>1</sup> While terrorists’ adaptability will always offer something new to comment on, the pieces of a comprehensive theory of modern terrorism are already visible within this research and commentary. Such a theory is key to countering the current expansion of terrorism.

A theory of modern terrorism serves multiple purposes. First, it provides a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon of modern terrorism and how the dynamics of any particular threat might play out. Second, it helps explain how terrorists may think and act. And, third, it provides insights into how states might react or choose to act in regard to the phenomenon. This article synthesizes and outlines such a theory and illustrates some of its implications for Special Operations Forces (SOF).

Current U.S. strategy documents essentially state that the United States is confronted with numerous security challenges and while these potential challenges are known and can be categorized to some degree, the specific details of exactly who, what, where, how, and when can only be anticipated, not predicted with certainty. The more aggressive stances of other nations have already revealed that the era of nation on nation traditional warfare is not over. The emergence of ISIL/ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) onto a world stage is an example of how even known threats can create strategic surprise.

To meet these challenges, the U.S. military is pursuing a hedging strategy, preparing to address multiple threats, known and unknown, and building increasingly sophisticated and adaptive forces. In doing this, SOF assume the main U.S. military role in the ‘war on terrorism.’ SOF must reexamine terrorism to better understand it and determine what must be done.<sup>2</sup> A theory of modern, or strategic, terrorism informs this strategic analysis.

## **Terrorism and the Taxonomy of War**

In the U.S. taxonomy of warfare, the two major forms are traditional warfare and irregular warfare (IW). Traditional warfare “is characterized as a violent struggle for domination between nation-states or coalitions and alliances of nation-states.” In traditional warfare, nation-states fight wars

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<sup>1</sup> Only selective works are noted herein, such studies and commentaries represent a significant body of work: one that has grown exponentially into thousands of books, articles, and documents since the 9/11 awakening.

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review (2014 QDR)* (Washington, D.C.; Department of Defense, 4 March 2014), iii, 21, 35, 37.

to impose their will on other states, or to preclude other states from imposing their will. The full range of state power may be used.<sup>3</sup> IW is defined “as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).” Irregular threats include “insurgency, terrorism, disinformation, propaganda, and organized criminal activity.”<sup>4</sup> Non-state actors are normally weaker in terms of power, but nonetheless IW also may involve the full range of power among participating states—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic.

Non-state actors may also create favorable outcomes across these dimensions of state power through indirect and asymmetric approaches, protraction, innovation, and adaptability. Civilian targets are often the primary objective attacked in order to influence the targeted populations in IW.<sup>5</sup> Globalization intensifies and empowers these aspects significantly over past movements in terms of technology; interconnectedness; size, diversity, and distribution of audiences; and media dynamics.<sup>6</sup> Just warfare traditions, while always somewhat argumentative, are more ubiquitous in traditional warfare than IW.

Terrorism is used because it works. Its efficacy in many instances may be questioned, but: “if terrorism never had any ‘positive’ outcomes from the perpetrators’ perspective, surely these violent tactics would have neither lasted nor escalated.”<sup>7</sup> Modern terrorism’s strategic utility and success can only be measured in terms of what the strategic purpose of the terrorism was, what the strategic objectives were, what was achieved, and whether terrorism as a form of warfare and strategy advanced the strategic position of the terrorists.

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***Terrorism is used because it works.***

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For those who doubt terrorism as a strategy, Colin Gray notes, “the (Provisional) IRA has bombed and shot its political wing, Sinn Fein, into government in Northern Ireland. [and] Jewish terrorists bombed and shot the state of Israel into existence, as they rendered Britain’s mandate over Palestine unsustainably costly.”<sup>8</sup> Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization (or splinter groups) has yet to accomplish its strategic purposes of destroying Israel and establishing a Palestinian state, but it gained territorial concessions and United Nations’ and other international political recognition and support. Its leadership’s failure to further capitalize on terrorism’s strategic gains does not invalidate terrorism as form of war. Ultimately, terrorism’s value as a strategic method can only be judged by the eye of its user, but others can understand how it works in theory and counter it.

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<sup>3</sup> Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Staff, 25 March 2013.), I-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I-6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Sloan, “Terrorism and Asymmetry” in Lloyd J. Matthews, ed. *Challenging the United States Symmetrically and Asymmetrically: Can America Be Defeated?* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, July 1998), 176–177.

<sup>7</sup> Beverly Gage, “Terrorism and the American Experience: A State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History*, June 2011, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Thinking Asymmetrically in Times of Terror,” *Parameters*, Spring 2002, 5–14.

Modern terrorism is therefore more than a tactic in other forms of warfare. It may well be that we understand how to respond to terrorism as a tactic, but not yet how to understand and respond to it as a distinct form of strategic warfare. Understanding modern terrorism's distinctness is important, because treating it inappropriately as a classic insurgency or other form of warfare may be counterproductive or cost prohibitive. Theory has been lacking, but terrorism studies are now advancing constructs suggesting that whether terrorists are applying them deliberately, through intuition, or through imitation, a coherent theoretical explanation is at hand.

## Definition and Premises

Terrorism studies suggest a definition and a set of premises that form the basis for a theory of modern terrorism. 'Terror' is often in the eye of the beholder and there is political leverage and advantage in seeing and not seeing terrorism in a situation. The conundrum is simple: "You have to find a definition that excludes the terror *we* carry out against *them*, and includes the terror that *they* carry out against *us*."<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, terrorism studies generally characterize modern terrorism as the purposeful use of violence conducted by nonstate actors in order to coerce governments and societies to accede to their political will.<sup>10</sup> Thus, modern terrorism can be succinctly defined for purposes of a theory as: the organized unlawful use or threat of violence by non-state actors and groups to instill collective fear in order to influence or coerce governments and populations to accede to demands that are political in nature and consequence. It adheres to a set of premises or principles in which the proper understanding of the application of and interaction among largely determine the success of terrorists and counterterrorists.

**Modern terrorism is a form of unlawful warfare.** Terrorism, when used as the principal strategic method to further political purposes, is a form of warfare—a distinct method for pursuing politics by other means. Modern terrorism is a subcategory of IW and insurgency. It is an organized and subversive use of violence to impose the terrorists' political will on the state or existing order.<sup>11</sup> It adheres to its own theory, subordinate to the general theory and relative categories of war. Modern terrorism's value lies in its strategic utility to political non-state actors. "Organized violence may be criminal, or recreational-sporting, but if it is not about the relative power of political entities, not only states, it is not warfare."<sup>12</sup> Terrorism's advantage is it is relatively simpler to organize, resource, and sustain than traditional warfare and classical insurgencies; however, it has its own complexity that must be mastered.

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<sup>9</sup> Noam Chomsky and Gilbert Achcar, *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Power; Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War, and Justice* (Penguin Books: New York, 2007), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Sloan, "Terrorism and Asymmetry," 174. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Staff, 16 July 2014), II-7. Audrey Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Staff, 8 November 2010, as amended). Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2nd ed., rev. (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc.), 2, 13–15, 33–35.

<sup>12</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Recognizing and Understanding Revolutionary Change in Warfare: The Sovereignty of Context* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, February 2006), 17.

Terrorism's vocabulary and practices may be moulded by social, cultural, and ideological influences, but it is fundamentally a use or threat of use of violence to impose political will and political consequences on others. The value of the object of the war determines the level of commitment of the antagonists. The greater the terrorists' aim, the more violent the terrorism and counterterrorism will be. Like other forms of war, terrorism has tactical, operational, and strategic level considerations. And, terrorism's success is determined by quantitative calculations, military genius, fog, friction, and chance. It also makes use of and leverages attributes of other recognized forms of warfare, such as information, psychological, and cyber warfare, but these are enablers as opposed to primary means to the political ends. Nonetheless, having been incorporated into terrorism as a form of war, the precepts of these other forms inform both terrorism and counterterrorism.<sup>13</sup>

Terrorism is considered an unlawful form of warfare because its practice does not observe 'just war' traditions or other accepted international traditions or conventions of war.<sup>14</sup> However states choose to address terrorism does not change its identity as warfare.

**Terrorism is founded in violence.** To be effective as a strategy, terrorism must inflict pain and damage. It is through violence that terrorists gain the leverage, influence, and power to effect political change—to influence will.<sup>15</sup> “All terrorism is violent, and its violence may be performed for symbolic as well as strategic reasons.”<sup>16</sup> Violence may also serve different purposes. First, it is a form of coercion. Second, given the relative weakness of terrorist organizations, it is a form of signaling the costs of not changing to target audiences and the terrorists' resolve to inflict pain. And, third, it serves process goals within the organization: purpose, recruiting, discipline, motivation and morale, and credibility.<sup>17</sup>

Violence for political goals is meant to be psychologically shocking in both its methods and its arbitrariness. An attack's power to inculcate fear is multiplied by the more atrocious the specific method; the more unexpected the target, timing, place, and victims; and the more unacceptable and abnormal the method. For example, the Islamic State's savvy 22-minute video showing the execution of Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh being burned alive in a cage, following his tour of a bombed building and self-condemnation of aerial bombing, was more than propaganda. The fact he was already dead while negotiations for his life were ongoing, the supposed hope offered to him and his Japanese co-prisoner by their confessions and the negotiations, and the inevitable death and the methods chosen were carefully scripted to create fear

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<sup>13</sup> Gray, *Recognizing and Understanding Revolutionary Change in Warfare*, 17. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75–121.

<sup>14</sup> Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Counterterrorism* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Staff, 24 October 2014), I-5, specifically states terrorism is not a form of warfare.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, rev. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2–3, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 217.

<sup>17</sup> Max Abrahms, “Does Terrorism Really Work? Evolution in the Conventional Wisdom Since 9/11,” *Defence and Peace Economics*, 22:6, 2011, 583–594.

in audiences and overreaction by states—suggesting no rules, no agreements, and no limits on cruelty.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, ideally any single act of violence in strategic terrorism is always a consideration of the most suitable form achievable to create the desired emotional responses and implied threat, while provoking a desired response from authorities. Targets are chosen because they represent something to the audiences to be influenced, either symbolic, sacrosanct, or implying the audience is also at risk in some form. Terrorism uses violence to intimidate or influence will and behavior through manipulation of emotions—fear, anxiety, curiosity, sympathy, or admiration depending on whether the target audience is directly or indirectly affected.<sup>19</sup>



Nineteen Airmen died and hundreds were injured in the terrorist attack at Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, on June 25, 1996. The front of Bldg. 131 was blown off when a fuel truck parked nearby was detonated by terrorists. Source: U.S. Air Force

Terrorism promotes and sustains a culture of violence. “Shared perceptions of oppression have created ‘cultures’ of violence around the world. ‘Cultures’ applies because culture entails both ideas and social groupings.”<sup>20</sup> Terrorist organizations are immersed in this culture. Violence is pursued for various reasons that favor terrorists’ ends, but it may also have negative consequences on the terrorist strategy. The culture of violence attracts some and repels others. Some participants in the organization’s structure, if given viable alternatives, incentives, or justification, may migrate from the culture of violence and reduce the base of support for the true ideologues. Others, once indoctrinated, may pose a continuing threat, even if the organization is ended.<sup>21</sup>

**Terrorism is primarily a human enterprise.** Terrorism as a form of war is an inherently human activity, not just a consideration of objective factors. It is a product of human genius, passions, and

<sup>18</sup> Elias Groll, “Islamic State Releases Video Showing Jordanian Pilot Being Burned Alive,” *Foreign Policy*, 3 February 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 23.

<sup>20</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 8. Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*, 206. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 229–243. Adam Roberts, “The ‘War on Terror’ in Historical Perspective,” *Survival* 47:2, 2005, 122–123.

fallacies. Terrorists may be inspired by their political ends, ideological/religious convictions, group cohesion, or a pre-disposition toward violence that may find an outlet in fighting against a perceived injustice—any or all. Each can be used and none can be ignored by terrorists or counter-terrorists. The acceptance of terrorism on any level and by any party is rooted in multiple and often complex justifications. These include: social justice, nationalism, ethnicity, religion, economic exclusion, personal gain, etc. “It is important to understand the distinctive worldview and moral justifications of each group, but it is also important to understand the political calculations of the leaders and the international networks of activists.”<sup>22</sup> Terrorism’s strategy focuses on the predictable emotional, intellectual, and cultural human responses of its adversaries and audiences. Its focus on the struggle of political wills through the manipulation of violence and targeted audiences accentuates war’s human character. Hence the human domain is the focal point of terrorism’s success or failure.

**Terrorism is contextual.** With the possible exception of chance, terrorism is subordinate to the strategic and operational context in which it exists—physical and cultural. Both terrorism strategies and counterterrorism strategies find their opportunities and challenges in the strategic circumstances that define the global, regional, national, and local environments in which the war is conducted. Understanding the factors in the environment that must be addressed or may be addressed to favorably influence success and acting appropriately in regard to them leads to more favorable outcomes. Since terrorists choose terrorism because of their own weakness, the purpose of terrorism is to use or change the strategic context to empower themselves to achieve favorable outcomes.

**Strategic terrorism expresses itself in terms of strategic objectives (ends), concepts (ways), and resources (means).** Strategic terrorism is the calculated use of violence to achieve a political end state. Too much violence can be counterproductive and too little violence can be ineffective. In terrorism strategies, as in state strategies, the strategists and decision-makers seek to determine what objectives (ends), if accomplished, will create the necessary strategic effects to realize their political end state. The concepts explain how (ways) the ends are to be achieved by the employment of the groups’ instruments of power (the resources available to the terrorist group in action).

Extensive tangible and intangible resources are available for terrorism. In addition to a group’s internal capacity—leadership, armed operations section, intelligence, logistics, finances, weapons, communications, individual talent and specialties, auxiliaries, etc.—terrorists have all the open resources and accessibility afforded by a globalized order. In this regard, there is much creative genius can make of this openness. Thus, violence and fear, the primary components that characterize terrorism, represent internal capacity in action through the planning, preparation, and attack of a target, but the concept of creating violence and fear is also dependent on leveraging

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<sup>22</sup> Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 13.

external resources such as the media for terrorism's strategic effect.<sup>23</sup> In both its use of forms of warfare and instruments of power, terrorism is interdisciplinary, seeking out and using new and old methods and instruments asymmetrically.

Terrorism strategy addresses outcome and process goals. The outcome goals are what terrorists state as their political and military operational objectives. Process goals are those things a terrorist group must do to sustain itself, such as “attracting media attention, scuttling organization-threatening peace processes, or boosting membership and morale often by provoking government overreaction.”<sup>24</sup> In the case of the latter, organizations must always address it. “If an organization is not prepared to spend time and effort on self-maintenance, it cannot effectively pursue ideological objectives or take advantage of strategic gains.”<sup>25</sup>

The practitioners of strategic terrorism, like states and militaries that pursue other forms of warfare, must concern themselves with the differing realms of strategy—both levels and kinds. They may choose to have or not have distinct global, regional, or national strategies as suits their purposes. In a similar manner, they may strategize about preparation for war (force development) and conduct of war (application of violence). Consequently, strategies may focus on political change at different levels, military operations, or organizational vitality.<sup>26</sup> Modern terrorist organizations, such as al Qaeda, think strategically in terms of the dimensions of systems, opponents, and groups (audiences), and integrate the dimensions in order to leverage their violence to achieve strategic ends.<sup>27</sup> Such organizations are strategic in purpose and activities.

**Terrorism is inherently asymmetric and adaptable.** Terrorism as a strategy appeals to violent non-state actors because, although they have the will to use violence against opponents relative to



Reformed Islamic extremist Mubin Shaikh reveals how radical Muslim groups use the internet and social media to recruit and finance their operations. Source: Karlheinz Wedhorn, George C. Marshall Center for Security Studies

<sup>23</sup> Harry R. Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional: Strategic Thinking and Strategy Formulation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2008), 135–146.

<sup>24</sup> Abrahms, “Does Terrorism Really Work?” 583–594.

<sup>25</sup> Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional*, 117–118.

<sup>27</sup> Ross Harrison, *Strategic Thinking in 3D: A Guide for National Security, Foreign Policy, and Business Professionals* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013), 141–161.

an established government or order, they are less powerful in traditional terms.<sup>28</sup> Terrorism permits the Melian dialogue—“right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”<sup>29</sup>—to be supplanted. In a strategy of terrorism, then, the strong-willed do what they can and the weak-willed eventually lose. In nontraditional terms, terrorists’ power can be significant and the asymmetry of a strategy of terrorism capitalizes on terrorists’ strengths and advantages: will, purpose, ruthlessness, ingenuity, initiative, clandestineness, surprise, and diverse sources of physical and moral support. These strengths and advantages, applied with understanding in the ongoing globalized transformation, create asymmetric opportunities and means to challenge traditional state power.

Terrorist organizations tend to be learning organizations. Beyond the dictates of survival, members and leadership are quick to see the opportunities for their form of warfare in the globalized environment and do the necessary transformation; critique themselves and learn from mistakes; and adopt and build on the success of others. As a consequence, they tend to adapt new technology and methods quicker than government forces, or to revert to traditional means if modern means are compromised. Consequently, their strategies and implementing tactics are extremely flexible and adaptable in methods and means, responding rapidly to changes or opportunities in an environment.<sup>30</sup>

**Terrorism uses, integrates, and is susceptible to both hard and soft power.** Terrorist violence is an application of hard power (killing and destruction) which is leveraged through the application of softer forms of power. Violence alone tends to be counterproductive to an organization’s goals unless it is interpreted and justified through information campaigns, theology, and social justice paradigms propagated through media and other means to target audiences. Terrorists are increasingly sophisticated in developing supportive narratives for violence and using media systems. In the war against terrorists, repression and counter-violence work; however, a state’s hard power security responses need to be accompanied by and supported with the appropriate application of softer forms of state power that counterbalance the terrorist’s narrative and delegitimize his means.

**Terrorism creates intended and unintended consequences.** A key tenet of strategic terrorism is to use deliberate violence with the intention of causing the state to overreact to the extent that the government loses credibility and public support. Other intended consequences may be to create political change by mobilizing and radicalizing the masses or eroding the political will of the people and state, but terrorism and its specific acts and the government’s reactions and counteractions create unintended second- and third-order effects in politics and society. These may work for or against protagonists in surprising ways. For example, the population may unite behind the

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<sup>28</sup> Abrahms, “Does Terrorism Really Work?” 583–594.

<sup>29</sup> Melian Dialogue, available at: [http://public.wsu.edu/~hughesc/melian\\_dialogue.htm](http://public.wsu.edu/~hughesc/melian_dialogue.htm).

<sup>30</sup> Brian A Jackson, et al., *Organizational Learning in Terrorist Groups and its Implications for Combating Terrorism* (Santa Monica, California: RAND, 2005).

government and accept greater security restrictions that undermine the terrorists' objectives. On the other hand, the population may resent security restrictions and vote a change of government. Strategic understanding of the general and particular context is essential to judging the impact of actions and reactions in an environment.<sup>31</sup>

**Terrorism competes for sovereignty, power, and authority with governments and other power-wielding and power-seeking institutions and organizations within society.** Integral to modern terrorism's success is the discrediting or elimination of any competitors for authority and power. One obvious competitor is an existing government, and by extrapolation, international governance. Modern terrorism's power rests in its increasing credibility as "a promising method of popular resistance to the nation-state and a valid means of rectifying injustice"; its romanticization and successful portrayal as a lesser evil overcomes its own immorality and lack of a favorable governance portfolio.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, successful terrorism on any level is dependent on real or perceived governmental failures or injustices. Terrorists discredit the government through word and deed, seeking through propaganda to convince populations the existing government is unworthy of authority, and through deeds of violence that it cannot govern effectively.

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***Terrorists discredit the government through word and deed ...***

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The ability to compete is founded in four major changes and the encompassing spirit of globalism: First, media modernization and expansion exponentially enhanced terrorists' ability to reach, influence, and coerce audiences through indiscriminate violence, making violence, as opposed to tactical advantage, the purpose of terrorist acts. Second, state sponsorship in the 20th century lent credibility and legitimacy to terrorism and terrorist organizations, degrading legal and moral norms for the use of violence. Third, terrorism was successful in getting concessions from states. It successfully exploited the linkage among media, public opinion, and democratic decision-making to achieve terrorists' political ends. Fourth, terrorists gained appreciation of successful linkage to technology and more lethal and coercive means of violence.<sup>33</sup> It is the terrorists' ability to capitalize on these changes that explains terrorism's ability to compete with states and others.

Outside of governance, terrorist organizations must eliminate or discredit others in civil society who might challenge the terrorists' success—out-of-government political parties, academic personalities, religious leaders, opinion shapers, etc. In addition, other competing terrorist factions must be eliminated as they complicate power sharing and political compromise and detract from funding and support.

**Terrorism juxtaposes multiple questions of legitimacy, morality, and sovereignty.** Modern terrorism's greatest delusion is that its ends justify recourse to extralegal and morally repugnant

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<sup>31</sup> Roberts, "The 'War on Terror' in Historical Perspective," 106–107.

<sup>32</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 1, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–6.

means. Its use of violence challenges state sovereignty and places terrorists outside the legitimacy and morality norms of contemporary political and social orders. Illegality places them at an initial disadvantage in the political discourse for power sharing within a state. Terrorism solves this predicament by juxtaposing multiple questions of legitimacy, morality, and sovereignty. Legitimacy is affected by the acceptance of the existing government's mandate and actions by the state's population; the state's accountability to its people; and the degree of acceptance of the government's responses by regional and international communities.<sup>34</sup>

The supreme legitimacy question posed in a terrorism challenge is the right of existing authorities to govern in the best interest of the state. It is a quintessential 21st century question “rooted in the belief that the current governmental system is not providing, and cannot or will not provide, the necessary balance among equality, freedom, security, and prosperity for the people, and that the challenger's political philosophy and system are truly representative”<sup>35</sup> of what is best for the people. As posed, the question has both competency and moral dimensions—‘cannot or will not provide.’

Exactly what constitutes ‘necessary balance’ is culturally and context dependent, but components of what a government must achieve are near universal. The more off-balance governing authorities are, the greater the opportunities for terrorists' success. The better balanced authorities are, the greater the opportunity for government success. Logically, both protagonists try to understand this balance and manipulate and interpret it in ways favorable to their success. For the government, the ability to address underlying grievances is critical. In addition, the government must stay within an acceptable legal and moral framework to sustain legitimacy at home and abroad.<sup>36</sup>

Further, terrorist organizations are engaged in a struggle with sovereign authorities. To the degree these authorities acknowledge and validate terrorists in any accepted value system, such as negotiations, UN recognition, or even acknowledging a war, the terrorist gains a degree of recognition and legitimacy as a political actor. Acknowledgement and recognition are essential for both sides in certain contexts, but need to be considered carefully.

Since terrorists do not govern as states must, with sovereign responsibilities and accountability, they contrast an ideology with the state's governance. Some terrorist organizations may demonstrate partial governance as Fatah and Hamas do, but their legitimacy is not founded in the quality of the whole of state governance, but on the promise of the ideology of Palestine for Palestinians and international aid. In fragile or failing states, terrorists enjoy significant advantages because the conditions causing fragility and failure beg for political change. In stable and successful states, governing authorities have the advantage of the defense—the stronger form of

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<sup>34</sup> United States Institute of Peace Press and U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 3–12.

<sup>35</sup> Max G. Manwaring, *Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Bolivarian Socialism, and Asymmetric Warfare* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, October 2005), 24–25. Manwaring, in analyzing Chávez, captures the spirit of the problem confronting 21st century governance.

<sup>36</sup> Roberts, “The ‘War on Terror’ in Historical Perspective,” 109–110.

warfare—but terrorism provides terrorists an offensive means with the advantage of the initiative. Terrorist acts then create the very conditions—the government’s inability to stop the terrorism or its overreaction to it—that raise questions about the government’s legitimacy.

Modern terrorism also seeks moral equivalency or supremacy over all competing authorities. Justification is achieved by assuming or creating forms of justification that place their goals and means on the same or higher level moral playing field than other authorities. Ideologies and religions most often serve this purpose. Moral equivalency is also acquired through other terrorist rhetoric that seeks to justify the universally acknowledged immorality of violence against the innocent: victims are guilty because they participated by allowing the alleged injustices; blame the government for denying peaceful change; violence is the only recourse left for change; in light of our identity group’s great suffering, it’s sad if others suffer too, but unavoidable; and, innocent people get killed in all forms of war.<sup>37</sup> With morality achieved, the issues are who is ‘more just’ and can govern better. It follows that terrorists cannot be allowed to perpetuate the illusion that they are morally equal or better than the legitimate government.

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***Modern terrorism also seeks moral equivalency or supremacy over all competing authorities.***

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Morality is not a single set of absolute beliefs common to all people. Morality is influenced by culture and is highly contextual. Terrorists tap into the symbology and emotional undercurrents of their targeted audiences’ belief systems. Outsiders, whether from other states, internal districts, or different social levels, may not understand the moral perceptions of the terrorists’ target audiences or that the same act of terrorism, or a preemptive or retaliatory attack, can create multiple moral responses among differing audiences. Understanding different perspectives and crafting meaningful morality arguments are crucial in countering terrorism. In addition, because terrorism seeks moral equivalency through questioning and challenging, it presents moral dilemmas and contests between its moral convictions and that of its adversaries requiring demonstration of moral courage.<sup>38</sup>

In the global insurgency, state sovereignty is a key issue. As the bedrock of international law, respect for it is crucial to the stability the United States requires for its preferred world order. A challenge to any state’s sovereignty is in essence a challenge to the working balance of power in the international order. Yet, transnational terrorism makes adherence to traditional concepts of sovereignty difficult. The conundrum posed is: if terrorists can move with relative freedom globally and still find sanctuary from preemption and reprisal within national borders, how can targeted states, such as the United States, respond effectively and not lose legitimacy—the perception and acceptance that power is used legitimately and justly—when violating the sovereignty of other states becomes necessary? Ultimately, it is an issue of an acceptable balance

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<sup>37</sup> Ernest Evans, “The Mind of a Terrorist: How Terrorists See Strategy and Morality,” *World Affairs*, Vol. 167, No. 4, Spring 2005, 175–179. Brian Michael Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves* (Washington, D.C.: RAND, 2006), 55.

<sup>38</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Combatting Terrorism,” *Parameters*, Autumn 1993, 17–23.

of power in the international order, and even the greatest power suffers in multiple ways when the nations and populations of the world perceive unjustified intrusions on the sovereignty of any state.<sup>39</sup>

Legitimacy, morality, and sovereignty interact and affect one another. Understanding how they play out in different contexts is crucial to effective counterterrorism.

**Terrorism leverages the advantages/vulnerabilities of state and global social norms.**

Terrorists recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the particular society or order they challenge and other relevant international societies in regard to their political goals and the use of violence. They understand the role and place of progress, political institutions, media, individual and collective rights, justice, value of life, and personal choice, and can exploit them asymmetrically to advantage at the local, state, and international levels. For example, the freedom of the press (a social norm in the West) allows the media to point the finger at the ills of society, and terrorists use this to raise and exploit domestic and foreign grievances. In a similar way, media and free speech allow terrorists and their supporters to present ‘balanced perspectives’ that advocate and legitimize the terrorists’ political cause and to some degree ‘justify’ terrorism. Even if the terrorist act is condemned, the media attention gives name recognition within the international arena and creates effects with other audiences, potentially lending legitimacy and improving the organization’s competitive position with states and other competitors.<sup>40</sup>

Some terrorist organizations have legal political fronts, which participate in legal political processes of governing and negotiations. To some degree, the Jewish Agency and Sinn Fein played this role at various times for Jewish and Irish terrorists. In similar ways, terrorists exploit legal rights and justice systems, freedom of movement, freedom of religion and religious infrastructure, and other mechanisms of traditional and modern societies. Modern terrorism exploits these norms even when ideologically opposed to them.

**Terrorism’s effectiveness is directly proportional to the nature of the responses and reactions by authorities and audiences.**

Terrorist groups design violence campaigns for effects the terrorists want to create among multiple audiences and on the responses of the states.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, the targets of terrorist violence are selected based on multiple considerations. Symbology is important, in terrorist thinking, to creating responses and reactions, as is visibility, strategic impact, and potential media coverage. Nonetheless, terrorists must also consider access to targets, levels of security, and potential audience or security forces backlash. As an example of the latter, successful passive defense against terrorism forces terrorists to increasingly focus on ‘softer’ targets, which may lead to a further downward spiral of radicalization and violence or to a

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<sup>39</sup> Ian Bryan, “Sovereignty and the Foreign Fighter Problem,” *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 54, No. 1, Winter 2010, 115–129.

<sup>40</sup> Fiona Adamson, “Memo for the Conference ‘International Law, International Relations and Terrorism,’” Social Science Research Council, 15 June 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 7–8.

public rejection of the violence. Such a spiral is ultimately counterproductive to terrorists, if the established order can withstand it, because it results in acceptance of violence and extreme repressive measures.

Terrorism's success is dependent in large part on poor judgment and strategic ineptitude of their state adversaries. The potential capabilities of states far outmatch those of terrorist organizations, and the success of terrorist organizations is relative to the ability of states to



A Marine aids in setting up roadblocks to secure a perimeter during a training exercise in Israel. Source: Cpl. Kelly Street, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Europe and Africa

address the terrorist organization in a timely and appropriate manner. Terrorism through asymmetric use of violence and other tools of power (information, propaganda, etc.) seeks to preclude or misdirect the state's timing and response, often turning both into negative consequences for the state. Terrorists succeed strategically when their violence results in the state overreacting and negatively affecting its own political legitimacy. Terrorists lose when their violence delegitimizes their political cause and moral basis.<sup>42</sup>

Modern terrorism, like all things in the 21st century, is interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, a terrorism strategy must consider attacks and justification, and counter-establishment arguments with a focus on multiple internal and external audiences with varied cultural and social identities and perspectives. Ideally, a strategy uses violence in a manner that anticipates the desirable responses from specifically targeted audiences without creating undesirable consequences elsewhere. The relative importance of, and the desired response from, any particular audience is context dependent—often an asymmetric strategic consideration. Positive audience response—that is, obtaining what was sought—and fence-sitting tend to favor the terrorist.

Terrorism is a struggle of wills, founded in a competition for audience perceptions. In the past, governments enjoyed an advantage in information and communications, but in the globalized information world, there are too many means of information sharing to control and perceptions are shaped by whoever can control the narrative, not the means of communication. Terrorists achieve favorable effects through a compelling story line, audience targeting, savvy productions, and timely release. It is enough for terrorist organizations to gain credibility, influence, and support.

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<sup>42</sup> Gray, "Thinking Asymmetrically in Times of Terror," 5–14.

For the Islamic state, it is the basis of a highly successful recruiting program.<sup>43</sup> Since much of the justification for terrorism is perceptual, military responses must be chosen carefully.

**Terrorism consists of structural components and processes.** Terrorism relies on and is made up of structural components: individuals, leaders and strategists, groups and organizations, movements, populations, state sponsors, and various enablers and supporters. Terrorists may operate as networks or hierarchical organizations, and occasionally a lone wolf may surface; but the achievement of a terrorist political agenda involves structures. It is through the organization and use of the structural components and processes that terrorist groups are led, conduct operations, manage survivability and risk, and sustain and resource themselves. Effectiveness and efficiency are affected by choices in regard to the structural components and processes.

**Terrorism is dependent on extra-organizational supporters or enablers.** Terrorism is always dependent on enablers outside of the terrorist organization. Such support may be willful, or a matter of acquiescence or naiveté. It may be provided by states, groups, or individuals.

Successful terrorism, particularly global terrorism, is facilitated by state assistance or acquiescence. Sometimes terrorist groups are sponsored by states, which gives terrorists access to a range of state capabilities—training, intelligence, and diplomatic support—as well as funding. In other cases, states provide no direct support but allow terrorists freedom of movement around and through the state to pursue their ends, in some form of acquiescence.

Safe havens are of particular concern. Terrorists must have some form of sanctuary in order to build, train, rest, regroup, and exist in a semi-nonoperational environment. Safe haven areas may exist in other states where: government elements are supportive of a group or lack the inclination or means of detection; social conditions allow identity groups to hide terrorists; or urban conditions facilitate hiding. The Internet provides a form of sanctuary. Denying or complicating sanctuary raises the risk for terrorists.

Terrorist organizations, acting as de facto states, acquire the international support to challenge an existing state and international order by following a two-centuries-old pattern of transnational mobilization found in insurgencies. It consists of: transnational constituency formation; transnational resource mobilization; and transnational organizational expansion, coalition-building, and contention. Using a powerful political ideology and effective propaganda and coercion strategies, a transnational constituency is politicized. From this constituency, passive transnational networks are created and then converted into more active political forces that allow terrorists “to use grey economy networks, organized crime, charities and NGOs, legitimate business, voluntary contributions, ‘taxes’ extortion, and recruitment to mobilize and consolidate resources for their purposes.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, “Neo-Classical Counterinsurgency?” *Parameters*, vol. XXXVII, No. 2, Summer 2007, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Adamson, “Memo for the Conference ‘International Law, International Relations and Terrorism.’” Muhammad al-Ubaydi, Nelly Lahoud, Daniel Milton, and Bryan Price, *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State* (The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2014), 4.

**All terrorist activities represent tradeoffs among effectiveness, efficiency, and security.** Terrorists are always in a state of personal risk. In the modern environment, any terrorist activity—no matter how benign or passive—may be identified by intelligence resources through multiple means. Even when in safe havens, state security forces may strike if they have the necessary intelligence, assets, and political will. Consequently, every terrorist activity, whether operational or administrative, must adhere to some degree of clandestine tradecraft which affects what can be done, how it must be done, the costs of doing it, and the time required.

**Terrorism is a pervasive and persistent threat.** Terrorism, as violence, is endemic to mankind and is in some form a constant within man's politics. Successful terrorism begets imitators and success or failure can create splinter groups—morphed imitators. The definition of success is subjective and ranges from overthrowing an existing government to simply the ability to act and be acknowledged. The latter is also a form of empowerment, which may result in sufficient psychological and material rewards for some potential terrorists and suggest greater potential to others. For example, the degrading of al-Qaeda's (AQ) leadership "saw the rise of increasingly aggressive and autonomous AQ affiliates and like-minded groups in the Middle East and Africa who took advantage of the weak governance and instability in the region to broaden and deepen their operations."<sup>45</sup>

Properly pursued in strategy, modern terrorism creates a state of equilibrium with the targeted state or order in which either side can lose, but neither can win easily, ensuring a persistent struggle.<sup>46</sup> If they survive and sustain the violence and its justification, time tends to favor the terrorists. Persistence, however, is relative. Originators and founders of strategies and organizations are the most persistent members. Soldiers appear to be more motivated by self-interest and commitment, affective ties, and group identity that can weaken over time, under pressure, or when the moral and legitimacy justifications are countered or fall apart as violence escalates.<sup>47</sup>

While terrorism cannot be easily eliminated as a threat, its strategic value and effectiveness, ease of use, and associated risks can be substantially affected through universal condemnation, effective governance, coordinated international counterterrorism activities, ideological countermeasures, and a better prioritization of challenges and resources by the state. Thus, a degree of pervasiveness and persistence can also favor the state.

**Terrorism is an inherently escalatory strategy.** Since terrorism's effectiveness is directly proportional to the reaction of audiences and the willingness and nature of response by authority, it is an inherently escalatory strategy. To succeed, terrorism uses violence to first create

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<sup>45</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Executive Summary* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, April 2014), available at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225050.pdf>. David C. Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Terrorism" in John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, eds., *Terrorism Studies: A Reader* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 41–60.

<sup>46</sup> Gray, "Thinking Asymmetrically in Times of Terror," 5–14.

<sup>47</sup> Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*, 221.

equivalency between itself and its designated adversaries, and then ascendancy—moral justification, political legitimacy, and sovereignty (ability and willingness to apply coercive power). If terrorists survive, they win when only they are willing to escalate to the next level of violence. In addition, since terror is the focal point of interaction and outcome for terrorists, the scope and frequency of violence is prone to increase—to show commitment, intimidate disparagers, build support, discourage or encourage populations, discredit the government, or to cause the government to react inappropriately.

**Terrorism is singularly idiosyncratic.** While all modern terrorism and terrorists share many characteristics and can be explained by a common theory, all may exhibit particularity, in some respects, as a result of leadership personalities, ethnicity, culture, ideology and religion, objectives, methods, structure, and environmental circumstances. Such diversity and complexity in terrorism cautions against over-generalization and argues for discrete analysis of terrorist threats (organizations, purpose, strategy, and environmental context) and tailored responses free of rigid designs or other constraints on understanding.

### **Implications for Special Operations**

The SOF community must cast a wide net to understand and promulgate the kind of war being waged and be concerned with all aspects of terrorism as expressed in theory. Potential strengths and vulnerabilities (opportunities and risks) for terrorists and states for each premise must be assessed and the relationship and interaction among the various premises understood to develop appropriate counter-strategies for the global wave and any specific terrorist organization. However, some overarching insights stand out:

- How states address terrorism is a strategic choice based on an assessment of the threat and environmental context, but it does not change modern terrorism's fundamental nature as a form of war. The professional responsibility for developing and understanding the preparation for and conduct of warfare lies within the military profession at the strategic level. Such a proposition does not imply that law enforcement and other instruments of power do not have critical roles and responsibilities, but recognizes the military's fiduciary role in national defense. Within the U.S. military, responsibility logically resides in U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) as a result of the SOF role in U.S. strategy and USSOCOM's role as a proponent of IW. Since terrorism is pervasive and persistent, USSOCOM should establish a dedicated SOF institution to study and promulgate theory and practice in terrorism in order to educate the force, the nation, and others in regard to its manifestations and implications. Without education and institutionalization, sufficient understanding of strategic terrorism is probably wanting among all the national agencies of the U.S. government, and the understanding of terrorism as warfare may be lost in the future.

- History suggests terrorism’s pervasiveness and persistency can be transcended in any particular era. A strategic question for the SOF community as a proponent is to ask how states can best do this individually and collectively in the context of legitimacy, morality, and sovereignty. SOF already champions interdisciplinary approaches, but USSOCOM and the SOF community must deepen the interdisciplinary perspective. Such strategic understanding ascertains what the United States should and must bring to the overseas effort in a host nation or region, but it also realistically appraises what the host nation or regional states and other actors can contribute, assesses risks, and informs operations. At the policy level, such perspective serves the traditional military responsibility to provide advice to policymakers. Within the military system, it contributes to strategy formulation and planning, and sharpens the blunt edge of military power.<sup>48</sup> The answers exceed the military realm of power, but not the military’s intellectual and professional interest in war and peace.
- Terrorism’s focus on the struggle of political wills through the manipulation of violence and targeted audiences accentuates war’s human character. War’s technical component is obviously important, but wars of terrorism are won within the human domain. SOF already has a focus on the human domain and recognizes that “special operations success centers on the human aspects of warfare ... [and] shaping of the environment and avoidance and winning of wars, are rooted in the human aspects of conflict and seek advantages in them.”<sup>49</sup> It is essential to remain focused on this and determine how to exploit terrorism’s dependency on structural components and processes, extra-organizational supporters and enablers, and tradeoffs among effectiveness, efficiency, and security.
- A major challenge for SOF is simply maintaining proficiency at the individual and organization levels in order to maintain sufficient readiness across the range of military options (ROMO) in a high-pace operational environment. USSOCOM must continually review limited force structure to ensure its composition is appropriately balanced to provide the best all-round capacity (organizations and mission sets) for the challenges anticipated. It is this capacity and readiness that provides the flexibility and adaptability of SOF as a whole to respond to the range of challenges across the ROMO and around the world, as well as the adaptability and flexibility of adversaries. While the 2014

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas X. Hammes, “Insurgency: Modern Warfare Evolves into a Fourth Generation,” *Strategic Forum*, No. 214, January 2005, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Harry R. Yarger, *21st Century SOF: Towards an American Theory of Special Operations* (MacDill AFB, FL; Joint Special Operations University, April 2013), 59. For some ideas on counterinfluence operations, see James J.F. Forest, *Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria*, (MacDill Air Force Base, Florida: The JSOU Press, 2012), 119–121.

*Quadrennial Defense Review* proposes to grow the special operations structure, how best to use the new resources must be founded in the future, not the past.<sup>50</sup>

- USSOCOM must prioritize the near battle and the far battle. The fundamental challenge here is to decide how limited forces should be used in regard to near-time issues versus using some of those forces to do things that preempt later problems or develop capacity to better deal with later problems. It is a consideration of both direct and indirect approaches and their associated resourcing considered over time. National strategy has already prioritized this in part with its emphasis on partnering and building partnership capacity, but only strategic understanding originating from a SOF perspective can provide the proper counsel on where the balance is and much of the what, who, where, when, and how of a viable strategy.

Terrorism is a strategic challenge because it is political in nature, and terrorists function strategically according to theory, even when the strategy is not readily apparent. Therefore, they can be defeated in their strategic aims through studying their use of various forms of hard and soft power, and countering, or better applying, friendly hard and soft power. Proper responses to or use of hard and soft power require theoretical and contextual understanding. Such understanding informs what to do, how to do it, and the effects on the equilibrium of use of force and legitimacy, morality and sovereignty. While terrorists do not have to adhere to the purity of theory, neither they nor their adversaries can ignore its logic without consequences. Therefore, theory always better informs strategic thinking and improves strategy and planning in the operational and force development domains.

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<sup>50</sup> 2014 *QDR*, 37. Andrew Feickert, “U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service Report, 8 May 2014, available at: <https://archive.org/details/226216USSpecialOperationsForcesSOFBackgroundandIssuesforCongress-crs>.





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