Constructions of Terrorism

by Scott Englund and Michael Stohl

Abstract

Occupying considerable space in the daily awareness of people across the globe, terrorism is nevertheless an elusive concept, falling prey to politicization, loose definition, and lack of context. In some ways terrorism has been described as whatever a person wants it to be, which often gives it an out-sized role in public opinion and policy demands. The Constructions of Terrorism Project, jointly undertaken by Abu Dhabi research center TRENDS Research and Advisory and the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, seeks to approach this slippery concept from multiple directions, employing a variety of research methodologies, from many academic disciplines and policy-making perspectives. The goal is to thoroughly explore the many ways in which terrorism is constructed by academics, political leaders, the public, and those who employ terror to get what they want. It seeks to provide a forum in which the diversity of conceptual understandings of terrorism can be collectively interrogated, believing that from the high-ground of a more thorough, rigorously investigated understanding of terrorism, better, more effective means of confronting it can be developed and implemented.

Keywords: *Terrorism; Counterterrorism; International Security; Political Violence*

The Constructions of Terrorism Project

Defining terrorism is a difficult but vitally necessary task if we wish to effectively confront it. Terrorism is violence that evokes a visceral, psychological response in order to coerce compliance. It is the indirect application of force such that the pain and suffering of its victims is intended as a means to some other end; the victims have done nothing to be targeted and can do nothing on their own to avoid violence. States and non-state groups can engage in terrorism. It is purposive, organized behavior with a rational objective, though its methods shock and appall. Studying terrorism requires the analysis to burrow into some of the darkest recesses of human behavior. This begins with understanding the multiple constructions of terrorism. By studying how the concept has been constructed in all its various incarnations, we may then better understand not only the problem of terrorism (and all its ramifications) but also form more effective means to limit the destruction attended by terrorist violence and better protect our societies.

TRENDS Research and Advisory, an Abu Dhabi based independent research center, and the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, announced a partnership in the summer of 2015 in order to focus on the "Constructions of Terrorism." Occupying considerable space in the daily awareness of people across the globe, terrorism is nevertheless an elusive concept, falling prey to politicization, loose definition, and lack of context. In some ways terrorism has been described as whatever a person wants it to be, which often gives it an out-sized role in public opinion and policy demands. The Constructions of Terrorism Project (COTP) seeks to approach this slippery concept from multiple directions, employing a variety of research methodologies from many academic disciplines and policy-making perspectives. The goal is to thoroughly explore the many ways in which terrorism is constructed by academics, political leaders, the public, and those who employ terror to get what they want. The COTP does not intend to solve the problem of defining terrorism, somehow exceeding the scholastic efforts of other research projects [1] or to fully reconcile divergent approaches to the theoretical concept. It does, however, seek to provide a forum in which the diversity of conceptual understandings of terrorism can be collectively interrogated, believing that from the high-ground of a more thorough, rigorously investigated understanding of terrorism, better, more effective means of confronting it can be developed and implemented.

Part of the Constructions of Terrorism Project is a two-year, four-conference series, of which there have now been two. The first was held at the University of California, Santa Barbara on December 3-4, 2015. That first conference opened the question of defining terrorism in all its various constructions, and thus laid the foundation of the project. The second conference was co-sponsored and hosted by the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. on April 27-28, 2016; it specifically confronted the challenges presented by the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIS/ISIL or by its Arabic acronym *Daesh*. Both conferences featured presentations by terrorism experts drawn from many academic disciplines and professional experiences. Each presentation prompted fruitful discussion among the conference attendees and members of the public who were able to attend at no cost.

Constructing a Definition: December 2015 Conference, Santa Barbara, California

At the first TRENDS-Orfalea conference on the "Constructions of Terrorism," three important and impactful ongoing discussions and conclusions about those discussions emerged during the two days:

1. It was clear that defining and describing terrorism requires putting terrorist violence into the political context in which it occurs - this will sometimes require introspective and reflective analyses of work and ideas that have been attempted previously;

2. Defining terrorism is important, but perhaps primarily when in support of decisions about how to approach counterterrorism;

3. Constructing terrorism must necessarily involve constructing terrorists and their organizations; acts of violence are carried out by individuals, therefore individual pathways to violence need to be considered and these actions are often conducted on behalf of organizations whose structure, goals and ideologies also need to be considered.

The conference also benefitted from significant discussions on research methodology and new avenues for quantitative analyses. Although there were differences of opinion about the relative importance of variables and approaches, considerable overlap emerged. The degree to which this complex question was shared and discussed from multiple disciplines and perspectives was encouraging and intellectually stimulating. The research presented at this conference will be published by the University of California Press in 2017.

The first continuing discussion centered on the insights that constructing terrorism is, in part, an introspective process, requiring an examination not just of terrorists and what they do, but also what is done to them before and after they decide to act. Acts of terror and terrorists themselves are embedded in both a local and a global political system. The best understanding of terrorism, therefore, situates an act of violence within its unique political environment in which there are multiple actors; to focus on the actions of terrorists alone is to perceive only part of the phenomenon. This was vividly described by conference speaker **Mark Juergensmeyer**, when he explained that focusing on the perpetrators of violence alone is like trying to understand the moves of a boxer in a ring fighting an invisible opponent. One boxer's moves are comprehensible only with reference to the other boxer's actions. The suicidal act of flying airplanes into buildings, for example, can make sense only when one understands that the perpetrators and planners of that act believed themselves to be engaged in an apocalyptic cosmic battle of good vs. evil. In fact, terrorist violence may be conducted with the objective of eliciting a specific reaction. **Clark McCauley** explained that "jujitsu politics" is designed to use the overwhelming power of targeted states against themselves. According to his research, acts of terror elicit anger, an emotional response that is stronger than fear and intimidation. As McCauley argued in his paper,

> *"Anger is associated with aggression and out-one group derogation; fear is associated with defensive strategies of surveillance and curtailed civil rights. Anger is the emotion sought by terrorists seeking to elicit overreaction to their attacks - using the enemy's strength against him in a strategy of jujitsu politics. The power of this strategy, and the importance of anger reactions in making the strategy successful, are hidden in definitions of terrorism that focus only on fear and coercion."*

The reaction itself is part of the larger strategy employed by terrorists. It is therefore impossible to disentangle the act of terrorist violence from the type of response it elicits; there are always at least two participants in an act of terrorism. Taking this argument perhaps furthest, **Lisa Stampnitzky** suggested that there would be no definition of terrorism without counter-terrorism. Rather than suffering from a dearth of definitions for terrorism, there is actually a plethora, making selection of a definition the real problem. Stampnitzky suggests that the best definition of terrorism is how it is defined in practice, thus counter-terrorism "defines" terrorism. Finally, **Richard Falk** reminded conference participants of the logically dangerous approach of using the term terrorism to signify a particular actor (usually one with whom one disagrees) rather than the nature of the violence itself. Focusing on actors invites selective use of the term; thinking about the act itself means to situate it in its political context.

A second discussion and set of insights centered on the recognition developed during the conference that defining terrorism is perhaps most important in determining what to do about it. Constructing terrorism means also constructing the institutional responses to terrorist violence. **David Schanzer** approached the topic from a legal perspective. Terrorism is a tactic, which can be used by anybody. Political expression can take many forms; even the use of violence to advance a political objective entails choices. What sets terrorism apart from other forms of violence is its intentional violation of the laws of war. He concluded,

> *"Understanding terrorism as a tactic—akin to tactics like conventional warfare or murder for hire - and ridding us of particularly useless concepts like a "war on terror" or even "counter-terrorism" will help bring clarity to the current sprawl of post-9/11 security policy."*

Sometimes definitions of terrorism can be too inclusive, or constructed in such a way as to exaggerate its potential for damage. **John Mueller** has long held that the threat of terrorism has been exaggerated, and shared with conference participants his observation that phenomena like civil war and insurgency are being re-defined as "terrorism." As a result, people over-estimate their own risk of falling victim to terrorist violence, which in part fuels over-reaction by government agencies. Mueller concluded,

> *"Although even knuckle-heads can occasionally do damage, there is something quite spooky about expanding the definition of terrorism so that it threatens to embrace all violent behavior that is directed at an ideological or policy goal, about imagining terrorists to be everywhere, about extrapolating wildly to conclude that many are omni-competent masterminds, and about acting like their press agent by flaunting and exaggerating their often-pathetic schemes to do damage. The result has been a mis-overestimation of terrorism's importance and impact."*

Central to Mueller's argument is the widespread tendency to "over-hype" the threat of terrorism. This is in part an artifact of how the media construct terrorism. **Benjamin Smith, Scott Englund, Andrea Figueroa Caballero, Elena Salcido** and **Michael Stohl**, provided the results of a quantitative examination of over 110,000 print newspaper articles which found that "al-Qaeda" was the most symbolically meaningful name used to describe terrorism over the past eighteen years. In fact, in sixty percent of the articles, there was no reason for al-Qaeda to be mentioned, except as a way to help define some other terror group. The implication is that applying an "al-Qaeda" frame so broadly could erroneously paint a veneer of solidarity over terrorist groups and actions that in fact belong to their own unique political milieus.

Properly constructing a terror threat is essential to creating effective counter-measures. In their paper, Englund and Stohl argued that when distinct constructions, or facets, of the contemporary threat presented by Daesh are conflated, then the response to that threat is bound to be muddled and ineffective. Properly

demarcating the various distinguishable facets of a terrorist threat is a necessary, but not sufficient, step towards effectively countering that threat. If "terrorism" is tricky to define, and different definitions lead to different responses, then the concept of "radicalization" has become perhaps even thornier. **Anthony Richards** argued that in the United Kingdom, the concepts of "terrorism, radicalization, and extremism" are being merged in unhelpful, and perhaps counter-productive, ways. He explained that in the UK,

> *"there is an increased wider concern with the way citizens think ideologically - that if they believe in certain non-violent dogmas that are said to be 'conducive' to terrorism then they are viewed as part of the 'terrorist problem', even if they deplore the violent methods of Al Qaeda and Isis."*

Conference co-convener **Richard Burchill** continued this line of analysis, arguing that although a proliferation of law concerning terrorism may allow governments to intervene earlier to disrupt terrorist planning, these legal constructions conflict with one another. This risks ever broadening the scope of what is considered "terrorism" or "extremism" which can lead to an inconsistent application of law.

Finally, terrorism, like any social phenomenon, is expressed through the actions of individuals. Any construction of terrorism should also account for how individual terrorists are constructed or how individuals come to accept or even carry out terrorist violence and how organizations that employ terrorism construct their rationales. **Mia Bloom** described "cultures of martyrdom" in which children are prepared for suicide missions:

> *"By fetishizing the afterlife and emphasizing the benefits of martyrdom, it has become easier for terrorist organizations to convince young people to volunteer for suicide operations. The 'culture of martyrdom' requires religious sanction and the promise of religious justification/reward."*

She found that strategies for preparing young people for suicide missions were similar to approaches employed by pedophiles. For example, both tend to prey on children in similar situations, and both use trust and incrementalism to lead to an action that is otherwise socially taboo. Finally, in a culture of martyrdom, targeted assassination of terrorist leaders is made less effective by building the infrastructure of a multi-generational struggle. **Lasse Lindekilde** presented two alternative constructions of the "lone wolf" terrorist. Rather than being isolated and entirely independent, Lindekilde and his co-investigator **Stefan Malthaner** explained that these individuals were usually at least tangentially part of a wider movement. In one construction, which they label the "peripheral-drifter-pathway," the individual is, "partially embedded in semi-radical friendship-groups and weakly connected to wider radical milieus." While never becoming a part of a radical group, the peripheral-drifter, "drifted in the margins, weakly considering but then again dropping plans to join jihad abroad." A second pathway, the "failed joiner," tries to connect to radical groups, is successful at making contact, but is rejected or expelled; forced to function outside the group, this individual decides to act alone. Finally, **Steven Corman** argued that although terrorism may not be strategically rational, it is organizationally rational from a narrative perspective. Familiar and widely accepted socio-cultural master narratives connect present-day events with the personal narratives of group members, which allows individuals to perceive "victory" even when terrorist groups rarely achieve their practical political objectives. In this way, story-telling and recognizing one's own place in a larger narrative can make otherwise irrational acts of self-sacrifice acceptable to both perpetrators and supporters of groups.

In addition to the foregoing discussion, valuable insights highlighted how terrorism research is conducted. Fitting neatly with the first discussion theme, that the best understanding of terrorism is to also consider responses to it, this line of inquiry is sure to benefit from the "Government Actions in Terror Environments" (GATE) dataset, which was introduced to the conference by **Laura Dugan**. Dugan argued that government actions beyond that which is explicitly described as counter-terrorism can affect the behavior of terrorist groups. She concluded by arguing that counterterrorism analysis should,

"reconsider conceptualizing counterterrorism to include more nuanced behavior by governments that could elicit a reaction from terrorist organizations or their constituencies. By expanding how we construct counterterrorism, we are better able to develop insight into what works and what does not work in different contexts."

Victor Asal, suggested that although a great deal of intellectual effort has been given to defining terrorism by focusing on who is targeted in a particular act of violence, "this has not led to an investigation of whether or not different operationalizations of the target would have different causal explanations." Asal suggests that the question may be addressed by testing the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to determine whether different operationalizations of the concept of terrorism (at least with respect to who is targeted by terrorist violence) would produce different correlations and causal relationships which would provide understanding of the dynamics of terrorism.

In the study of international relations, three common levels of analyses are the international systemic, the domestic institutional, and the individual. Applying these analytical lenses to the same political phenomenon can lead to different theoretical explanations; often each has significant strengths and weaknesses. As with most analytical tools, each level of analysis is likely to explain some things better than others. Likewise to the general study of international relations, which is best served by employing a variety of explanatory models, the Constructions of Terrorism Project (and the study of terrorism in general) will benefit most from a multi-disciplinary effort approaching the phenomenon from different levels of analysis. Whether approached as a social phenomenon, or a tactic of asymmetric warfare, or a violation of international humanitarian law, or as an individual cost-benefit decision or psychological roots analysis; terrorism is sufficiently complex to warrant an equally sophisticated and nuanced approach to its study.

Confronting the Islamic State/Daesh: April 2016, Washington, D.C.

For the second conference, again organized by TRENDS Research and Advisory, based in Abu Dhabi, UAE, and the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at the University of California, partnership was sought with the Stimson Center. It brought together terrorism and counter-terrorism experts from diverse backgrounds to confront the challenges presented by Daesh. Underlying questions addressed by the participants included: What is the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS/ISIL, Daesh)? What threat does it pose to global security? Should we even consider it to be a threat? What will be left behind after it is defeated or destroyed?

The conference began with a discussion that traced the history of "terrorism" as a means of political expression and looked at how counter-terrorism actions can both inspire and deter terrorist violence. It challenged participants to reconsider the very definition of who the terrorists actually are. This opening panel of **Mark Sageman, Laura Dugan**, and **Marie Breen-Smyth** instituted what became an abiding theme of the conference: to effectively confront Daesh, we must be willing to challenge established conceptions of what it represents, what motivates it and what the appropriate response to it is.

From the theoretical and statistically driven examination of the issue from the scholarly heights, two academics with counter-insurgency experience in Iraq dove deep to compare Daesh to historical violent revolutionary political movements. **Craig Whiteside**, a former US Army officer with combat experience in Iraq, asserted that Daesh represents a return to revolutionary warfare, much in the same strain of the kind of war fought by the Vietnamese Communists in the 1960s and beyond. **Scott Englund**, a former intelligence analyst, also with Iraq war experience, compared Daesh to contemporary and historical guerrilla movements in order to understand how it might eventually end. He concluded that Daesh will likely remain a traditional terrorist threat even after its inevitable military defeat.

The next panel considered how Daesh still survives in a conflict where so many states and violent organizations are opposed to it, and even thrives in the form of affiliated organizations spreading across the globe. **Hussein Ibish** assessed that the conflict spread across Iraq and Syria represents one of the most complex conflicts in modern history; Daesh is able to survive in the spaces of the overlapping and conflicting interests of each of its opponents. **Joel Day** explained how Daesh has extended its influence to organizations as far away as South-East Asia, and how these far-flung organizations tend to benefit from their association with Daesh. Thus, the threat posed by Daesh appears global, requiring a global response.

How Daesh communicates and how Western media cover it was investigated in the next panel. **Charlie Winter**, using documents he has translated himself, reported on a pattern of ISIS off-line propaganda, which he compared to the insidious propaganda efforts undertaken by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. **Ben Smith** and **Andrea Figueroa-Caballero** examined the failure of United States media outlets to differentiate between Daesh and al-Qaeda; and argued that this fundamental failure has led to the public mis-understanding the motives (and perhaps goals) of Daesh. Such confusion also leads to poor perception of appropriate counter-measures, and unrealistic expectations of an early victory.

Understanding how Daesh recruits supporters and inspires them to leave home and join the fight in Iraq and Syria or to conduct acts of terror wherever they might live is of particular interest to European political leaders. Danish scholar **Lasse Lindekilde** presented a model of de-radicalization and disengagement used by the Danish city of Aarhus, which experienced a disproportionately high number of its citizens leaving to join the fight in Syria and Iraq and evaluated its current status. **Sara Zeiger** described the role women play in terror organizations like Daesh, and the role they can play in discouraging people in their community from joining or supporting Daesh. **Mia Bloom** described how Daesh preys on children and uses them as child-soldiers. Taken together, the discussion centered on how some of the most vulnerable are drawn into fighting, what efforts are being undertaken to challenge the attraction of Daesh's ideology and how to re-direct young people and women away from potentially self-destructive behavior whether they were voluntary or involuntary recruits.

Two apparently different approaches to the topic ended up converging on the important question of how people perceive the threat posed by violent organizations. **Victor Asal**, using new data and statistical analysis, demonstrated patterns of lethality among violent groups in the Middle East region while **John Mueller** challenged the basic understanding of Daesh by asserting that it does not represent a true threat to global security. Though these two presentations began from two different beginnings, and used entirely different methods, the discussion converged around how threats are perceived and thus how the public demands their governments to respond. Although being killed in a terrorist attack is a very remote threat, people remain concerned about terrorism. Indeed, though Daesh (or the threat terrorism in general) does not represent an "existential threat," it is a tremendously significant threat to security in the Middle East and North Africa, a region that remains strategically important for much of the rest of the world.

Finally, the very nature of the threat Daesh presents, and what could come after it was considered at the conference. **Risa Brooks** began by posing an analytical puzzle, is Daesh qualitatively different from other terrorist groups, or is it just an extreme example of prior types? If it is different, is that the result of its own characteristics, or the environment in which it operates? She assessed that though it may take advantage of unique political conditions, Daesh does not represent a unique or exceptional threat. Psychologist **Clark McCauley** explained that he believed the core of the Daesh phenomenon is emotion, specifically humiliation, which he defined as the combination of anger and shame. He then proposed a radically different approach to confronting Daesh. This violent group is successful because it offers an exhilarating remedy for humiliation, thus to effectively end it as a violent movement, an even greater remedy must be made available. His solution was to reconsider the ethnically based nations that redrew the map of the Levant drawn at the conclusion of the First World War, claiming that essentially this was a process that is already underway.

The conference concluded with an insightful discussion between Stimson Center Chairman of the Board, Ambassador **Lincoln Bloomfield** and International Law scholar **Richard Falk**, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. Professor Falk drew two conclusions regarding Daesh: first, it is not exceptional or wholly unprecedented in its activity, and second, what is new is that the two primary actors are not strictly "states" as traditionally understood in international law. Daesh is an insurgency or guerrilla movement that desires statehood, but will not achieve that; the United States is a "global state" that has taken on a "self-appointed" global security role. Secondly, militarism has failed to resolve political conflicts that are contained within states. Militarism is defined as an over-reliance on military force to influence the outcome in a political conflict. Militarism is not necessarily equated with any use of military force, which is at times necessary. Drawing examples from Afghanistan, Libya and the Syria-Iraq crisis embodied by Daesh, military action has often only exacerbated political conflicts. The implication is that using additional military force (a large commitment of United States personnel, for example) to confront the problem presented by Daesh may not be effective.

The Way Ahead: Terrorism and Human Rights

Terrorism and efforts at confronting terrorist violence (lumped under the broad label counter-terrorism) both raise complex questions about human rights. Very obviously, terrorist organizations such as Daesh, or Boko Haram, or the Taliban violate the very basic human right to life; but to what extent do some counter-terrorism measures infringe on this same right–or other rights? It may be simple to condemn terrorists for their inhumane tactics, but it is much more complicated to judge the measures which societies that rely on the rule of law are willing to employ in order to be and feel more secure. As the Constructions of Terrorism Project continues, future efforts will be directed toward this thorny set of questions. Tentatively, the third conference is scheduled to be held in London in December of 2016.

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Note

[1] See, for example, Alex P. Schmid (2012), "The Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 2. URL: http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/schmid-terrorism-definition/html .