

The End of Terrorism?

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Previewing his newly published book, *The End of Terrorism?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

With suicide bombers blowing themselves and others to pieces in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere it may seem premature to consider the end of terrorism a serious possibility. In the United States and Western Europe the authorities warn of the danger posed by difficult to detect 'lone wolves' stalking through the streets in search of vulnerable targets. Some experts still consider the possibility of terrorists acquiring WMD to be a serious threat.

On the other hand, in Spain the group Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA) has recently decided to abandon its armed struggle, after many years, and pursue negotiations with the authorities in Madrid. A few years ago in Sri Lanka the Tamil Tigers were crushed by the country's armed forces. And if al Qaeda was a multi-national business corporation few investors these days would be willing to buy its stock in the expectation of making a decent profit. Indeed, the *Washington Post* reported earlier today that al Qaeda's leadership has been reduced to just two members.

This is to suggest that in some cases terrorism does seem to come to an end. How and why?

The tactic survives, people (may) change

As a tactic terrorism seems unlikely to disappear. Carrying out spectacular attacks on civilians in the hope of wreaking vengeance, winning publicity and stimulating fear is an attractive option for relatively weak groups confronted by powerful enemies. But to say this is not the equivalent of saying the same cast of characters with the same goals stage these attacks endlessly. Both terrorists and terrorist groups have come and gone over the years or decades.

In the case of individuals, the claim 'once a terrorist always a terrorist' is simply not true. The world abounds with former terrorists, individuals who participated in terrorist violence in their youths but who have gone on to other careers in later years.

Dilma Rouseff, the current president of Brazil, was a member of a revolutionary 'urban guerrilla' band in her youth. A former leader of the Provisional IRA, Martin McGuinness was recently defeated in his bid for the Irish presidency. Bill Ayers and his wife Bernadine Dorn became academics following clandestine lives in the Weather Underground during the 1970s when they appeared on the FBI's most wanted list.

However intriguing such personal stories, my book focuses on the circumstances of how terrorist groups or, better, groups that use terrorism come to an end. The answer provided in *The End of Terrorism?* is that they (1) suffer defeat, (2) achieve success or (3) undergo a transformation.

Scenario #1: Defeat

Defeat is the most common outcome.

Terrorist groups may be defeated in several ways. The most obvious is through the coercive power of the state – the arrest, capture or killing of a group’s members. Some evidence exists suggesting that the police are better than the military at bringing about this end. On some occasions ‘decapitation’ seems to work. Arresting or killing the group’s leadership seems to make a difference. This is particularly true for groups such as Japan’s Supreme Truth and Peru’s Shining Path that are led by charismatic individuals.

The consequences of the American-led campaign to decapitate al Qaeda via the use of missile-firing drone aircraft remain a matter of controversy. At a minimum it seems fair to say these ‘hellfire’ attacks have severely disrupted its operations.

Terrorist groups may also defeat themselves. For example, they may cause a popular backlash among their nominal constituencies by staging attacks on segments of the population whose support they had hoped to win. Also, since terrorist groups are typically composed of a mix of ‘irreducible’ extremists along with more politically sensitive individuals, they are subject to fragmentation. This tendency is particularly true for underground groups whose members live their lives on a clandestine basis.

Scenario #2: Success

It is less common, but terrorist groups may also succeed in getting what they want.

In 1983–84 Hezbollah’s precursors succeeded in persuading the U.S. and France to withdraw their armed forces from Beirut by staging suicide attacks on their embassies and military personnel. This instance and a list of others that could be cited suggest that terrorism may achieve tactical successes.

Strategic success – situations in which terrorist groups achieve their ultimate goals – are rarer, but they still occur. The use of terrorism helped the National Liberation Front (FLN) win Algerian independence from France (1954–1962). It was an auxiliary means to be sure, but terrorist attacks carried out by both the Vietminh and Vietcong insurgencies aided in the communist success against the French and American forces in Vietnam.

In cases of strategic success, terrorism seems to work best when it is used as part of the repertoire of broad scale insurgent groups – rather than as a stand-alone measure.

Scenario #3: Transformation

Terrorist groups also may end by going through a transformation.

Terrorism is a tactic which may be picked up and put down as the perceived need for it changes. On some occasions terrorist groups may become peaceful political parties which seek support through the ballot box rather than the bomb. The Provisional IRA (PIRA) ‘decommissioned’ its weapons and resurrected itself as Sinn Fein which now competes for voter support in Northern Ireland. Something similar may be in the process of occurring with ETA in Spain.

The categories described above will not satisfy the social science requirement of mutual exclusivity. Coercion and backlash may combine to bring about a group’s defeat for example. Various other combinations are possible. Nevertheless they clearly point to the fact that terrorist groups are not endless. They do come to an end.

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