

Chapter 13

Social Networks and Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explains how international terror networks, consisting of individuals and organizations spanning countries and continents, form and evolve. It describes tools and methods used by social network analysts to study such networks; their applications by counterterrorist organizations; their limitations and problems in data collection and analysis; and directions for future research. It also discusses a few recent case studies by prominent researchers.

INTRODUCTION

The historical antecedents of terrorism can be traced from Antiquity through the Middle Ages (Chaliand & Blin, 2007). As early instances of asymmetric warfare, Jewish Zealots revolted against the Roman Empire, while Hassan-i-Sabah sent his Iranian followers on suicide missions to kill Sunni Caliphate leaders in the 11th century (from whence the word *assassin* might have originated). The French word *terrorisme* (from the Latin *terrere*, “to frighten”) originated in 1793–94 during the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror (*la Terreur*) when the Committee on Public Safety killed

between 15,000 and 40,000 citizens. Despite its initial application to states terrorizing their own citizens, the concept was subsequently broadened to include actions by nonstate actors. Historians identify several global waves of terrorism: social revolutionaries and anarchists in the 19th century; anti-colonial rebellions and nationalist independence struggles in the mid-20th century; leftist revolts of the late-20th century (Rapoport, 2001; Sedgwick, 2007). The most recent wave – international Islamist militancy – emerged during the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and continues today. But, periodization is never neat: far-left and anarchist attacks have resurged in Europe recently (Winfield & Gatopoulos 2010).

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Analysts have proposed more than a hundred definitions and measures of terrorism, suggesting that no consensus will soon be reached (e.g., Ruby, 2000; Butko, 2006; Halwani, 2006). Actions may be variously characterized as terrorism according to legal, moral, religious, political, or behavioral criteria. However, among features common to many definitions is violence committed by groups with political goals, targeted against civilians, and intended to create fear among a larger population. Following U.S. law, the Department of State defines international terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.” The State Department publishes an annual list of about 40 Foreign Terrorist Organizations, and a comparable number of Groups of Concern, considered threatening U.S. national security. Critics charge that the State Department’s methodology is politically biased and its reports are inaccurate (e.g., Kreuger & Laitin, 2004). The European Union and other nations use varying criteria to construct their terrorist organizations lists. In this chapter, terrorist organization refers to a group using violence against civilian targets for political purposes.

Terrorism overlaps with two related forms of asymmetric warfare waged by less-powerful groups against nation states: guerilla wars and insurgencies. Guerillas are small-group formations that fight in uniform using mobile military tactics, such as ambushes, raids, and sabotage, targeted on military and police forces rather than civilians. Insurgencies are armed uprisings, often by groups neither wearing uniforms nor fighting in military formations, with the political aim of overthrowing a constituted national government and replacing it with another regime. Some insurgents and guerillas carry out terror acts against civilians to undermine a populace’s confidence that the central government can ensure its security. But, whereas an insurgency typically uses violence to advance revolutionary goals, for many terrorists “violence replaces rather than complements a

political program” (Morris, 2005, p. 2). Applying the distinctions among these ideal types to actual historical cases is often difficult. Thus, the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts of the early 21st century could be construed as terrorism, insurgency, or guerilla war at differing times and places: Sunni and Shiite militias, Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan (Smith, 2008), and Al-Qaida terrorists in both nations as well as in Pakistan’s tribal areas. Given these ambiguities, the social network principles discussed below are pertinent to all three forms of asymmetric warfare.

TERROR NETWORKS

Some theorists seek the origins of terrorism in macro-level socioeconomic grievances and repressive political conditions (e.g., Tilly, 2004; Tosini, 2007; Intriligator, 2010). For example, Donald Black’s theory of “pure terrorism” examined its social geometry (Black, 2004). Terrorists strike more often across greater social distances; for example, indigenous people rise up against their colonial masters or members of one religion assault adherents of another. Violent acts less frequently occur downwardly or laterally, against social inferiors or members of one’s ethnic group or community. A necessary condition for terrorism across large social distances is geophysical propinquity, which modern technologies have greatly increased. Airplanes, cell phones, satellite maps, and high-rise offices facilitate perpetration of mass violence against civilians in arenas far from militants’ homelands. Robert Pape (2003, 2005) analyzed 315 suicide bombings from 1980 through 2003. Almost all those suicide terror campaigns aimed to coerce liberal democracies into withdrawing their military forces occupying the militants’ homelands.

For example, spectacular suicide terrorist attacks have recently been employed by Palestinian groups in attempts to force Israel to abandon the

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