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## Conflict, territory, terrorism - state of research

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## **IS TERRORISM PERCEIVED IN SECURITY STUDIES AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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The aim of this paper is to present standpoints prevailing among the researchers of terrorism, which refer to the problem of efficiency of terrorism treated as a coercive strategy. Authors basing on the scientific papers, which in their opinion are of key importance for this discussion, indicate the most important arguments in favor of the efficiency of terrorism and opposite ones. According to which not only terrorism is inefficient, but also antiterrorist strategies built upon misinterpreted attacks – must turn out to be defective. Analyzing few important publications in the discussed matter authors recall the notions included in it in order to provide an overview of the most important conceptions.

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Contemporary the problem of terrorism is a very often undertaken subject in the research field of security studies and allied sciences. Much has been written on the beginnings of terrorism<sup>1</sup>, motivations of terrorists<sup>2</sup> and antiterrorist activities<sup>3</sup>. A problem, which appears often in discussions is the efficiency of antiterrorist activities. Some researchers claim the terrorism to be an efficient strategy, some (e.g. Max Abrahms) prove otherwise. Polarization of beliefs results from

interpretations of statistic data and analysis of states' reaction to terrorist attacks and consequences of actions undertaken by both sides of the conflict.

In this paper authors will try to present some of the approaches to the problem of efficiency of terrorism, which in their opinion are most worth to be recalled. The aim of this paper is to point out the most important threads of the scientific discussion concerning the problem of strategies of terrorism and to systematize somehow the knowledge regarding the subject, however with no ambitions to redefine the problem. The paper sums up the research conducted by the authors on the problem of effectiveness of terrorism, the way the terrorism itself is perceived in the recent studies and the reasons why there is no agreement among scholars.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g.. M. Crenshaw, *The Causes of Terrorism*, "Comparative Politics", vol. 13, no. 4, p. 379.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g.. M. Abrahms, *What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy*, "International Security" 2008, 32:4, p. 78-105; G. LaFree, G. Ackerman, *The Empirical Study of Terrorism: Social and Legal Research*, "Annual Review of Law and Social Science" 2009, no. 5, p. 347-374.

<sup>3</sup> T. Plümper, E. Neumayer, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: An Integrated Approach and Future Research Agenda*, "International Interactions" 2014, no. 40, p. 579-589.

In short (this conception will be developed in the further part of the paper) one may ascertain that bipolarity of these attitudes results from adopting one of the two assumptions: 1. terrorism works as in most cases terrorist groups manage to influence the government of attacked state; 2 terrorism doesn't work because governments misunderstand political targets of the attacking groups.

Currently prevailing is the first of abovementioned attitudes. M. Abrahms in following words refers to attitudes winning in this argument: "The prevailing view within the field of political science (...) is that terrorism is an effective coercive strategy. The implications of this perspective are grim; as target countries are routinely coerced into making important strategic and ideological concessions to terrorists, their victories will reinforce the strategic logic for groups to attack civilians, spawning even more terrorist attacks"<sup>4</sup>.

There is much to be discussed within the issue of terrorism<sup>5</sup>, and researchers has been trying to define and explain this phenomenon for a long time. Not only effectiveness as a problem of assessing such a policy was under consideration of researchers, but also morality of terrorism, both of which are, as it turns out, related in this specific case. C. A. J. Coady, considering the problem of morality of terrorism wrote in 1985: „The crucial point is merely that when violence is viewed as a means to certain ends (believed to be) of importance then there are broadly three ways of assessing its morality. One is to reject it on the ground that the use of violence (or at any rate, severe violence) in

the pursuit of good ends is never morally licit; this is the pacifist position. A second is to assess the violence solely in terms of its efficiency in contributing to the achievement of the good ends, this is the utilitarian response. A third is to assess the violence , partly in terms of its efficiency, but more significantly in terms of the sort of violence it is, most particularly whether it is directed at morally appropriate targets but also whether it is barbaric or grotesque or disproportionate"<sup>6</sup> .

Thus depending on belief in the importance of a political goal – effectiveness of violence in the form of terrorist attacks can be considered justified either simply because it leads to accomplishing the goal, or because it shortens the time of pursuing this goal and hence eventually lowers the amount of victims.

Researchers, who claim that "terrorism works" e.g. Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter<sup>7</sup> prove this view on the basis of analysis of the reaction of governments of particular states to terrorist attacks: "terrorism has been so successful that between 1980 and 2003, half of all suicide terrorist campaigns were closely followed by substantial concessions by the target governments"<sup>8</sup> They explain the reasons of its effectiveness in following words: "Terrorism works not simply because it instills fear in target populations, but because it causes governments and individuals to respond in ways that aid the terrorists' cause"<sup>9</sup>.

The fundament for such an argumentation is a belief that terrorists are too weak to intrude their will by military means. They have however the power to convince people to act accordingly to their wishes by changing people's beliefs regarding such

<sup>4</sup> M. Abrahms, *Why Terrorism Does Not Work?*, "International Security" 2006, vol. 31, no. 2, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this paper authors adopted the definition of terrorism proposed by A. H. Kydd, B. F. Walter, according to which terrorism is the use of violence against civilians by nonstate actors to attain political goals. See: A. H. Kydd, B. F. Walter, *The Strategies of Terrorism*, „International Security" no. 31, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> C. A. J. Coady, *The Morality of Terrorism*, "Philosophy" Vol. 60, No. 231 (Jan., 1985), pp. 47-69.

<sup>7</sup> A. H. Kydd, B. F. Walter, op. cit., p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

issues as terrorist's ability to impose costs and the level of their engagement to the cause.

Researches prove that change of mindset cannot occur in the communication act – within “cheap talk”, which have no power of influencing people's behavior: “If al-Qaida had informed the United States on September 10, 2001, that it would kill 3,000 Americans unless the United States withdrew from Saudi Arabia, the threat might have sparked concern, but it would not have had the same impact as the attacks that followed. Because it is hard for weak actors to make credible threats, terrorists are forced to display publicly just how far they are willing to go to obtain their desired results<sup>10</sup>”. When discussing power simple verbal statements are rarely treated as credible for actors have incentives to lie and bluff, hence “terrorists who wish to influence the behavior of an adversary must resort to costly signals. Costly signals are actions so costly that bluffers and liars are unwilling to take them<sup>11</sup>”. In opinion of Kydd and Walter terrorism violence is such a form of costly signaling.

Robert Pape explaining the logic of suicide attacks ascertains on the basis of statistical data that weak actors would use such actions when peaceful means fail and conventional military tactic is unavailable because of the disproportions of power<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, he says: „over the past two decades, suicide terrorism has been rising largely because terrorists have learned that it pays<sup>13</sup>, and thereby tilts to opinions that terrorism is an entirely rational and efficient strategy.

Max Abrahms proving the researchers, who claim as Pape does, wrong, based his argument on analysis of statistics of the

effects of terrorist attacks. He distinguishes two types of terrorist campaigns, of which only one can be considered as effective or ineffective and is important for his studies. Abrahms writes: “strategic terrorism aims to coerce a government into changing its policies; redemptive terrorism is intended solely to attain specific human or material resources such as prisoners or money. Because my focus is on terrorism's ability to compel policy change, terrorism in this study refers only to strategic terrorism campaigns<sup>14</sup>”. The researcher examined in his study the strategic effectiveness of the twenty-eight terrorist groups designated by the U.S. Department of State as foreign terrorist organizations since 2001. Analyzing effectiveness of their activity Abrahms indicates two dimensions along which terrorism's effectiveness can be measured: combat effectiveness and strategic effectiveness. The first one describes the level of damage inflicted by the coercing power; the latter refers to the extent to which the coercing power achieves its policy objectives. In the opinion of the researcher policy objectives are much more difficult to assess than policy outcomes: “In general, the stated objectives of terrorist groups are a stable and reliable indicator of their actual intentions. This assumption undergirds the widely accepted view within terrorism studies that groups use terrorism as a communication strategy to convey to target countries the costs of noncompliance. Because these group seek political change and because their stated objectives represent their intentions, terrorism's effectiveness is measured by comparing their stated objectives to policy outcomes<sup>15</sup>”. To make such comparison Abrahms created a four-tiered rating scale i.e.: “total success”, “partial success”, “limited success” and “no success”.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 50-51.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> R. A. Pape, *The Strategic Logic for Suicide Terrorism*, “American Political Science Review” 2003, vol. 97, no 3, p. 343-361.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 343.

<sup>14</sup> M. Abrahms, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 47-48.

The analysis showed that the twenty-eight groups, which were recognized to have greatest significance to U.S. counterterrorism policy, have achieved their objectives less than 10 percent of the time: "As the political mediation literature would predict, target countries did not make concessions when terrorist groups had maximalist objectives. Yet even when groups expressed limited, ambiguous, or idiosyncratic policy objectives, they failed to win concessions by primarily attacking civilian targets. This suggests not only that terrorism is an ineffective instrument of coercion, but that its poor success rate is inherent to the tactic of terrorism itself"<sup>16</sup>.

Such conclusion leads us towards the problem of strategies of terrorism, for depending on both the target and objective, the way of acting of terrorist groups and means used to accomplish the goal vary. Suicide, for example, attacks are part of strategy defined as "attrition", which goes on weakening an enemy gradually and attacking long enough for the enemy to undertake activities meeting the demands of terrorists. Within this strategy terrorists want to convince their enemy that they are strong enough to

cause serious damages if the specific policy will be continued<sup>17</sup>. One can assume that the key to lower the amount of terrorist attacks would be an efficient policy of counteracting them, as reacting to them in a specific manner results in occurring subsequent attack threats.

An important question posed by scholars quoted in this paper was whether the character of goal influences the way of acting of the terrorist groups? The objectives of terrorists vary, however there are five which seem to be the most frequently emerging and important, i.e.: regime change, territorial change, policy change, social control and status quo maintenance<sup>18</sup>. When it comes to typologies of strategies used by terrorists to accomplish their goals, researchers of the subject proposed a number of them (e.g. Thomas Thornton<sup>19</sup>, Martha Crenshaw<sup>20</sup>, David Fromkin<sup>21</sup> and Edward Price<sup>22</sup>). The proposition by Walter and Kydd sums up existing typologies and seem to be adequate to the newest conditions. According to this typology there are five strategies of terrorism, which are best presented in the form of a following figure:

		Target of Persuasion	
		Enemy	Own Population
Subject of uncertainty	Power	attrition	intimidation
	Resolve		outbiding
	Trustworthiness	spoiling	provocation

**Fig. 1** Strategies of Terroris Violence  
**Source:** A. H. Kydd, B. F. Walter, *The Strategies of Terrorism*, „International Security” no. 31, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> A. H. Kydd, B. F. Walter, op.cit., p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> T. Thornton, *Terror as a Weapon of Political Agitation*, [in:] *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*, ed. H. Eckstein, London 1964.

<sup>20</sup> M. Crenshaw, *The Causes of Terrorism*, "Comparative Politics", vol. 13, no. 4.

<sup>21</sup> D. Fromkin, *The Strategy of Terrorism*, "Foreign Affairs", vol. 53, no. 4.

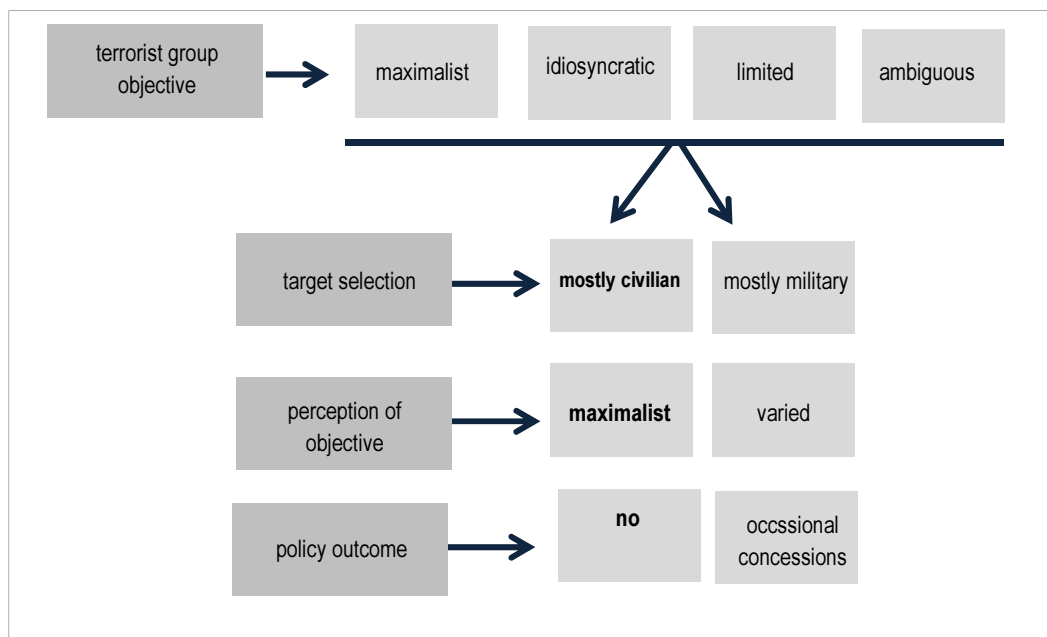
<sup>22</sup> E. Price, *The Strategies and Tactics of Revolutionary Terrorism*, "Comparative Studies in Society and History", 1977, no. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 76.

The strategy of attrition is created to make the target believe that maintaining specific policy will bring costs which are not worth the gains. This strategy is designed to accomplish the objective. Intimidation is based on preventing some undesired behavior by means of threats and costly signals and is used mostly to overthrow a government or gain social control over a population. Provocation is a strategy used mostly by the groups pursuing a regime and /or territorial change and it's based on persuading the local audience of untrustworthiness of the target of attack, which needs to be vigorously resisted. Spoiling strategy is used to achieve a goal of ensuring that peace overtures between moderate leaders on the terrorists side and the target government do not succeed. The last strategy—outbidding is described by the scholars as follows: “outbidding arises when two key conditions hold: two or more domestic

parties are competing for leadership of their side, and the general population is uncertain about which of the groups best represents their interests”<sup>23</sup>.

M. Abrahms proves however that „terrorism is an ineffective instrument of coercion”<sup>24</sup>, especially in the case of terrorist group oriented to attacking civilians (CCTG – Civilian-centric terrorist groups) because their activity is not properly understood by the attacked states. Attack on a state is interpreted by governments as an attempt to destroy the country and conquer it, without taking into account any possible political motivations of terrorists. Researcher created an interesting model of civilian-centric terrorist groups, by which he tried to prove that terrorist groups, when attacking civilians, do not achieve their policy objectives regardless of their nature.



**Fig. 2** Contingency Model of Civilian-centric Terrorist Groups

Source: M. Abrahms, *Why Terrorism Does Not Work?*, “International Security” 2006, vol. 31, no. 2, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> A. H. Kydd, B. F. Walter, op.cit., p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> See M. Abrahms, op. cit.

In Abrahms opinion reaction of the USA authorities to the 11 September is an example: "Americans—especially in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks—have tended to ignore al-Qaida's rationale for violence. Instead of focusing on al-Qaida's policy demands, they have fixated on the effects of the terrorist attacks and inferred from them that the terrorists are targeting the United States to destroy its society and values"<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand those who argue that terrorism is ineffective draw attention also to the problem of misunderstanding the attacks by governments of targeted states. Going back to the example of the reaction of U.S. to the attack in 2001, let's once again quote Abrahms, who in his paper writes about "Al-Quaida miscommunication strategy": " Bin Laden and his lieutenants frequently complain that the United States has failed to "understand" the "true reason" for the September 11 attacks. Instead of attacking because "we hate freedom", the attacks are a response to the fact that "you spoil our security" and "attack us. [...] As correspondent inference theory predicts, supporting evidence suggests that President Bush and large segments of American society focused on the disastrous effects of al-Quaida's behavior and inferred from them that the terrorists must want to destroy American society and its values—despite al-Quaida's relative silence on these issues"<sup>26</sup> In the researcher's opinion the response of the U.S. to the September 11 Terrorist Attacks illustrates why terrorist groups that target civilians are unable to coerce policy change, for in the immediate aftermath of the attack Americans didn't focus on the terrorists' policy demands, but solely on the effects of the attacks, from which they inferred that the aim of the terrorists is to destroy the society and values of the United States.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 70.

There are however scholars, who analyzing the response of the U.S. to this specific attack and to other ones, come to a completely opposite conclusion: "The United States pulled its soldiers out of Saudi Arabia two years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, even though the U.S. military had been building up its forces in that country for more than a decade"<sup>27</sup>. In response to the attack was formulated the counterterrorist policy of the USA. In four basic rules of this policy (messianism, unilateralism, militarism and prevention) was decided i.a.<sup>28</sup>:

1. To make no deals with terrorists, as such deals could lead to mimicry, escalation of terrorist acts and demands, and gradual winding of the "spiral of violence".
2. To punish perpetrators of terrorists acts gracelessly for the committed acts.
3. To isolate and pressurize states, which are conducive to terrorism in order to force them to change their policy.
4. Enforce abilities of counteracting terrorism in other countries collaborating with the USA and require support (by cooperation of intelligence services, trainings or equipment support).
3. To block the capital flows used in order to finance terrorist activity.
4. To increase control over the export of guns, armament and dual-purpose material and substances to preclude terrorist groups from buying materials used to produce weapon of mass destruction.
5. To efficiently use international instruments – decisions of convents and protocols regarding production and possession of chemical and biological weapon and control of nuclear materials.

It is important to continue elaborating the subject of strategies of terrorist groups

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<sup>27</sup> A. H. Kydd, B. F. Walter, op.cit, p.49.

<sup>28</sup> Por. <http://www.terroryzm.com/polityka-stanow-zjednoczonych-wobec-terroryzmu-w-xxi-wieku/> (access: 5.10.2014)

and the problem of effectiveness of their activity to better understand how targeted states should response to a possible attack and how contemporary governments can prevent and counteract such acts of violence. Oriental politics scientists suggest that so that the counterterrorist activity could be efficient, it has to be conducted on many levels<sup>29</sup>:

- Military level (special operations),
- Level of espionage and counterespionage ,
- Diplomatic level,
- Internal and international legal regulations;
- Others (propagandist, financial etc.)

Providing security preventively is one the pillars of counterterrorism, because terrorist counts on astonishment and shock caused by their attack, therefore it is so important to prepare for the possible attack. One should however draw attention not only to methods of counteracting acts of aggression, but also remember about political motives of these actions, for as Abrahms highlights: "If countries impute terrorists' motives from the consequences of their actions, then the communities in which terrorists thrive may impute states' motives from the consequences of their counterterrorism policies, reinforcing the strategic logic of minimizing collateral damage. Correspondent inference theory can explain not only why terrorist campaigns rarely work, but also perhaps why counterterrorism campaigns tend to breed even more terrorism"<sup>30</sup>.

All of the above remarks regarding the discussion among the scholars on the efficiency of terrorism does not exhaustively cover the undertaken subject, but only outlines the main tread of the both sides' argumentation. For within the fight against terrorism we should take into account every argument and analysis, which allow for better understanding of this complex phenomenon and thus counteracting it better.

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<sup>30</sup> M. Abrahms, *Why...*, s. 76.