Democracy and terrorism

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Summary

The empirical evidence for several decades demonstrated a strong relationship between democracy and terrorism, with hybrid regimes experiencing higher levels of terrorist attacks and casualties, and more established democracies and autocracies both experiencing less.[1] While this pattern continues to prevail, after 2001 it has evolved toward an increased number of terrorist attacks in nondemocratic countries, particularly those in conflict or under military occupation (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Somalia), and in a handful of consolidated democratic countries actively engaged in suppressing terrorism through the use of force (e.g., Israel, the United States, Spain, France, and the United Kingdom). Regardless of regime type, countries with higher levels of state-sponsored violence and abuse against their citizens were found to have greatly increased risks associated with violent extremism.[2]

These findings suggest that a country's best defense against terrorism is to improve the legitimacy of the state through more democratic, human rights, and rule of law practices at the local, national, and international levels. Drivers of terrorist violence, nonetheless, derive from multiple and complex sources, many of which are local. Responses must be tailored to specific circumstances and should be comprehensive, involving all relevant actors at the community level.

What the evidence tells us

In evaluating the comparative evidence on terrorist attacks, it is important to distinguish between acts of domestic and international terrorism. While the latter tends to get more attention, the volume of deadly attacks around the world is predominantly domestic in nature and therefore more reflective of local circumstances.

Domestic terrorism: Democracies responsive to public demands and with liberal practices like respect for civil liberties and human rights, rule of law, and protection of minorities are far less likely to experience domestic terrorism.[3] States that respect an individual's physical integrity (e.g., eschewing torture and other cruel treatment) and due process also tend to experience less terrorist violence.[4] In a study of 131 countries from 1984 to 2004, the rule of law, defined as "the synthesis of effective and impartial judicial systems and ordinary citizens' recognition of law as legitimate," was shown to be negatively associated with terrorism.[5] On the other hand, countries with severe social, political, ethnic, and/or economic fragmentation and inequality were more vulnerable to terrorist attacks.[6] Environments more at risk of terrorism may also feature territorial conflicts or incomplete democratic transitions in which some groups hold grievances that generate radicalization and violence and corresponding repression by authorities.[7] Democracies that feature strong constraints on executive and police power and high levels of freedom of movement and association also may create more permissive environments for terrorist activity. Strong counterterrorism measures, however, combined with high regard for citizen safety and property rights, and the type of effective political accountability prevalent in consolidated democracies, can serve to limit terrorism.[8]

Transnational terrorism: As measured both by the number of deadly attacks and of casualties, terrorist violence by transnational actors against unarmed civilians tends to occur less in established democracies and more in states characterized as nondemocracies. For example, strong democracies average between 24 and 63 percent of the rate of transnational terrorism-caused deaths *per capita* of nondemocracies.[9] But other indicators are mixed. For example, based on recent experience in Iraq and Syria, over 27,000 foreign fighters traveled from both democratic and nondemocratic states to join extremist groups like ISIS, with a slightly higher average coming from nondemocratic states.[10] Some democracies engaged in military interventions or occupations abroad experienced higher levels of terrorism, e.g., in Afghanistan or Iraq. Harsh tactics like torture, aerial bombings of medical facilities, use of chemical weapons, and arbitrary and prolonged detention of so-called "enemy combatants" have radicalized affected populations and facilitated recruitment efforts by terrorist groups to seek revenge, including against established democratic powers.

Total terrorism: Based on data reporting both domestic *and* transnational terrorist attacks between 1998-2008, stronger democracies experienced both fewer terrorism-related deaths and less frequent deadly terrorist attacks compared to nondemocracies.[11] For example, democracies experienced somewhere between 11 and 39 percent of the frequency of deadly domestic and transnational terrorist attacks on a *per capita* basis of nondemocracies, and between 11 and 21 percent of the number of terrorism-related deaths *per capita* compared to nondemocracies. Closer analysis reveals that democracies were disproportionately likely to experience very low or zero rates of terrorism; similarly, among groups of countries with the highest rates of deadly terrorism, democracies are disproportionately underrepresented. Countries scoring furthest away from high levels of democracy, on the other hand, experience the worst levels of terrorist violence. A recent empirical study of domestic and transnational terrorist attacks in 159 countries between 1970 and 2012 concluded that strong democracies and strong autocracies experienced less terrorist violence while hybrid regimes, including weak democracies, experienced much more.[12]

Another indicator of terrorist activity—the emergence of major violent extremist organizations (VEOs)—corresponds closely to this finding: of 65 major VEOs evident since 1992, 51 emerged in less democratic countries such as Afghanistan, Algeria, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Iran, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, Uganda, and Yemen.[13] A study of deadly terrorist attacks in 119 developing countries with major VEOs between 1992-2015, however, found that higher scores of democratic governance (as measured by Polity), more executive constraints, and increased political competition were positively associated with the severity of violent extremism.[14] Nonetheless, hybrid or anocratic regimes, as expected, experienced a higher number of fatalities from violent extremism, suggesting that the instability of mixed polities with underdeveloped practices of rule of law and respect for human rights is more conducive to terrorism.[15]

Explanations

Democratic societies, by their more open and permissive nature, may appear more vulnerable to attack due to lower costs and increased opportunities for conducting terrorist operations, and lower risks to terrorists of detection and apprehension. However, such societies also tend to respond more vigorously to terrorism when it occurs on their soil through a combination of legal, political, and social measures; courts, legislatures, and public opinion tend to reject violent means to achieve political aims when nonviolent means are widely available. Hence, higher rates of accountability for terrorist crimes, the stronger legitimacy of institutions engaged in punishing such violence, strong public rejection of such acts, and more opportunities to hold political leaders accountable when they fail to act, serve as important deterrents to terrorist violence in democracies.[16]

Researchers argue that the quality of democracy has something to do with the higher rates of terrorist violence in countries that have made incomplete transitions to liberal democracy, including weaker respect for civil liberties and the rule of law. Underlying grievances like underrepresentation in government, or economic and ethnic discrimination, for example, increase the likelihood of domestic terrorism.[17] There is also some empirical support that an increased number of "veto players" increases the incidence of domestic terrorism.[18] There is likewise some evidence that more open electoral systems experience less conflict and vice versa. This evidence, however, is contradictory and, in any event, its predictive value is low given that very few groups or individuals actually engage in terrorist violence. And for good reason: Terrorism has a very poor record of producing desired political results—7 percent versus 25 percent for large-scale insurgency and 52 percent for nonviolent resistance, according to one study.[19]

In the arena of transnational terrorism, the evidence is fairly strong that governments engaged in military operations abroad are more likely to become targets of terrorist attacks;[20] several of these are well-established democracies. Transnational terrorist organizations tend to originate in authoritarian or failing states and target democracies like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. It should also be noted that some terrorist organizations like al-Qaida have articulated goals that cannot, in any event, be met through more democratic systems of governance.

Stable, well-established democracies with fair and open political representation of all sectors of society, and full respect for fundamental human rights and the rule of law experience significantly less domestic terrorism. On the other hand, weaker democracies that have taken only partial steps toward political consensus-building and rule of law, or continue to repress or ignore certain groups are more vulnerable to terrorist violence. The international community, therefore, should prioritize efforts to help strengthen democratic institutions that protect the rule of law and human rights in countries that have weak records of liberal democracy as an important means for reducing terrorist violence.

In evaluating what type of democracy and rule of law assistance is most constructive to countering terrorist violence, it is important to frame any efforts in the broader context of strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions to protect civic participation, deliver justice fairly, and avoid harsh tactics of repression. Rule of law programming, for example, should include:

➡ building strong judicial institutions and cultures,

➡ supporting fair and effective criminal justice systems,

➡ expanding human rights education,

➡ effectively punishing abuses by state security forces when they occur,

➡ promoting widespread citizen participation (especially by marginalized groups) in public policy decisionmaking, and

➡ fighting corruption.[21]

Such efforts should not be packaged exclusively or principally as a counterterrorism strategy. It is also critical to tailor strategies to the local context of each situation given the complex array of grievances driving radicalization.

Democracies engaged in coercive methods to repress terrorism abroad have a special obligation to do so in ways that do not engender even greater violence in response. The experience of the last 15 years demonstrates the increasing vulnerability of these more established democracies to transnational terrorism through both coordinated attacks and lone wolf operations inspired by ISIS or other transnational terrorist groups. It is incumbent upon them to construct democratic strategies for addressing violent extremism. These should include:

➡ community-building initiatives at the local and national levels,

➡ education,

➡ outreach to women and youth,

➡ addressing socioeconomic and political grievances, and

➡ abstention from torture and other illegal and counterproductive means of countering terrorism.

A strategy of civil nonviolent resistance to groups like ISIS can contribute to a comprehensive approach to contain terrorist groups by weakening their legitimacy and support base.[22] The treatment of terrorists not as combatants but as criminals subject to prosecution under international rule of law and human rights standards is also an important element of a comprehensive strategy to counter and deter terrorism. The return of foreign fighters to countries with weak rule of law and human rights deserves special attention for applying these recommendations.

Endnotes

1. References to the strength or weakness of democratic governance and human rights are derived from quantitative and qualitative assessments contained in three comparable indices of liberal and electoral democracy (V-Dem), civil liberties and political rights (Freedom House), and regime type (Polity IV). The term "hybrid regimes" refers to countries that fall in the category of weak democracy or weak autocracy, without specific regard to current trends forward or backward.

2. Based on an analysis of 119 non-OECD/European Union countries from 1992-2015, as summarized in Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, U.S. Department of State, "The Relationship between Democratic Governance and Violent Extremism in the Developing World: An Empirical Assessment (Draft)," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2017).

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6. Leonard Weinberg, "Democracy and Terrorism," in *The Roots of Terrorism*, ed. Louise Richardson (New York: Routledge, 2006).

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8. Khusrav Gaibulloev, James A. Piazza, and Todd Sandler, "Regimes Types and Terrorism," *International Organization* 71 (Summer 2017).

9. "Brookings Working Paper on Democracy and Terrorism," (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2017).

10. The Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," (New York: The Soufan Group, 2015), http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf; Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICCR)*, January 26, 2015, http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/.

11. "Brookings Working Paper on Democracy and Terrorism."

12. Khusrav Gaibulloev et al., "Regimes Types and Terrorism."

13. Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, "The Relationship between Democratic Governance and Violent Extremism.

14. This corresponds with previous literature suggesting that more open democratic systems with executive constraints and civil liberties provide more opportunities for terrorist activities. Note, however, that established OECD democracies with generally higher scores of democratic governance were not included in the more recent study.

15. Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, "The Relationship between Democratic Governance and Violent Extremism."

16. Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Max Abrahms, "Why Democracies Make Superior Counterterrorists," *Security Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 223-53; Benjamin A. Valentino, Paul K. Huth, and Sarah E. Croco, "Bear Any Burden? How Democracies Minimize the Costs of War," *Journal of Politics* 72, no. 2 (2010): 528-44.

17. James A. Piazza, "Draining the Swamp: Democracy Promotion, State Failure and Terrorism in 19 Middle Eastern States," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 6 (2007): 521-39.

18. Erica Chenoweth, "Terrorism and Democracy."

19. Ibid.

20. Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the fuse: The explosion of global suicide terrorism and how to stop it* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

21. Nicholas Robinson and Catherine L. Kelly, "Rule of Law Approaches to Countering Violent Extremism," (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2017).

22. Maria J. Stephan, "Civil Resistance vs. ISIS," *Journal of Resistance Studies* 1, No. 2 (2015): 127-50.