"Terrorist Organizational Dynamics"

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Abstract: Most terrorism is carried out by organizations with particular political motivations, mobilization issues, and other characteristics that affect their behavior, including their attacks. Group dynamics are often overlooked when research focuses on units of analysis such as countries or individuals. However, understanding the organizational dynamics of terrorism can shed light on this type of violence in important ways. This chapter begins by discussing definitions of key concepts, and then analyzes recent literature on several prominent topics: outbidding, internal group dynamics, and organizational longevity or failure. It concludes by noting potential avenues for future research, including more work on strategic interactions between terrorist organizations and states, as well as increased dialogue with research on related topics such as civil conflict.

Key words: Terrorist groups, terrorism, organizational dynamics, outbidding, organizational longevity, civil conflict.

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There are many approaches one can use to understand terrorism, including the study of individual terrorists, broad social movements, or countries where terrorists operate. However, analyzing organizations provides important leverage. Most terrorist attacks are carried out by formal organizations, and therefore most attacks are by groups with particular political goals, mobilization issues, structure, internal strain, and other characteristics. Understanding these dynamics can illuminate a great deal about the phenomenon of terrorism.

The organizational focus of terrorism studies is not new. In the 1980s, scholars presented important theoretical work on organizational dynamics of terrorism (e.g., Crenshaw, 1985, 1987; Oots, 1989; Post, 1987). An early study of democracy and terrorism used the number of terrorist groups in a country as the outcome of interest (Eubank and Weinberg, 1994). Case studies of terrorist groups have always been important topic in the field (Crenshaw, 1995; Rapoport, 2001). A less common, although often powerful approach, is formal theory (Bapat, 2012; Lapan and Sandler, 1988). A substantial development occurred around 2008, with the publication of several global data sets of terrorist organizations (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008, Cronin, 2009; Jones and Libicki, 2008). This has permitted scholars to explore global trends in terrorist group behavior, using the same quantitative approaches already used to study terrorism – although usually with the country or country-year as unit of analysis (Li, 2005).[1]

Policy-motivated debates raise questions about which level of analysis is "best," as scholars discuss which actors pose greater threats. Formal terrorist organizations have received the most policy and scholarly attention—and for good reason. Formal groups

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[1] Silke (e.g., 2001) noticed that terrorism studies was unusual in the social sciences for rarely using interferential or even descriptive statistics.

directly carry out the vast majority of terrorist attacks, and attacks by these groups are usually far more lethal than attacks by lone actors (Alakoc, 2015; Phillips, 2015d). Historically, organizations like the Red Brigades and the Shining Path terrorized populations, and groups such as al-Nusra Front and Boko Haram carry on the tradition. But some analysts argue that informal networks, or "bunches of guys," are the dominant security challenge—not formal organizations (Sageman, 2008). Because al Qaeda has been weakened since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Sageman argues that small groups of individuals inspired by the group are more of a threat than the organization itself. Others maintain that lone wolf attacks are especially threatening, citing the increasing number of such attacks in Western countries (Michael, 2012).

The next section discusses the definition of terrorist organization. Then, the essay explores recent lines of research on organizational dynamics of terrorism, including outbidding, internal group dynamics, and organizational termination and longevity. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research. A caveat is that this chapter cannot discuss every article or book written about terrorist groups. It seeks to discuss a few key lines of research, and in doing so shed light on a powerful approach to understanding terrorism.

What is a terrorist organization?

Terrorism is often defined as violence by subnational actors to obtain a political or social objective through the intimidation of an audience beyond the noncombatant victims (Enders and Sandler 2012, 4). The definition is of course debated, but many authors agree on core elements. However, there has been little discussion of what constitutes a "terrorist organization," despite the common use of the term. About 15 years before this chapter was

written, two separate analyses noted that there was no clear definition of "terrorist organization" (McCormick 2003, 47; Silke, 2001, 3). Debating the nature of the concept is important for clarity and consistency in research. Additionally, the effects of government strategies are likely to be conditional upon the nature of the targeted group. This is what Cronin (2015) argues in an article titled, in part, "ISIS is not a terrorist group." Differences across group types help explain why leadership decapitation has distinct consequences depending on whether the targeted group is a terrorist or criminal organization (Phillips, 2015b).

One conceptual dispute involves the distinction between terrorist and guerrilla groups. De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca (2011) argue that terrorist groups are "underground groups with no territorial control," while guerrilla groups occupy territory. The FARC and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula would not be considered terrorist groups by this standard, as they control territory. This notion is consistent with some scholars' definitions (Della Porta, 1995; Cronin, 2015). However, other studies use a broader understanding of terrorist organizations that includes any subnational political organizations that use terrorism (Asal, 2012; Jones and Libicki, 2008;). Some research does not explicitly define the term, but includes organizations that hold territory or use guerrilla tactics in analyses (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008, Enders and Sandler, 2012). Others use the terms interchangeably; Hoffman (2006, 35) describes Hezbollah, the FARC, and the LTTE as terrorist groups, but notes that they "are also often described as guerrilla movements."

An additional issue of contention involves blurred lines between criminal organizations and terrorist groups. For example, Shelley (2014, 113) argues that some scholars have been constrained by a "false dichotomy" of criminal groups driven by profit, and terrorists driven by political motivations. This is consistent with work suggesting

convergence or hybridization of criminal and terrorist groups (Makarenko, 2004). Regarding specific cases, there are debates about whether various groups are terrorist or criminal organizations. Examples include Mexican drug cartels, the Neapolitan Camorra, the FARC, and Abu Sayyaf (Flanigan, 2012; Makarenko, 2004; Toros and Mavelli 2013; Williams, 2012)—all of whom are have engaged in some degree of criminal activity while using terrorist tactics.

In spite of these debates, most studies of terrorist organizations use the term in a fairly consistent manner. After a survey of the literature, I found that most studies implicitly or explicitly used the following understanding of terrorist groups: subnational political organizations that use terrorism (Phillips 2015c, 229). They are subnational actors, although they might have connections to states. They are primarily political organizations, meaning that while groups such as the FARC and Abu Sayyaf also engage in crime, it does not seem to be their primary purpose. Groups that primarily engage in crime and only affect politics to increase their profits, such as Mexican drug cartels and Italian mafias, are thus not considered terrorist groups. This is the definition employed in this chapter. As with any concept, the appropriate conceptual boundaries likely depend on one's research question. For some purposes, it could make sense to exclude groups that primarily use other tactics, such as guerrilla warfare. Debate continues over this topic, and debate is better than the relative silence that existed for many years.

Recent research on terrorist organizations

Outbidding and competition

It has been noted that terrorism studies suffers from some shortcomings as a theoretical field, such as insufficient accumulation of knowledge over time, or a lack of rigorous hypothesis testing (e.g., Crenshaw, 2014; Young and Findley, 2011; Ranstorp, 2006). One important exception to both of these issues, I would argue, involves the subject of outbidding. "Outbidding" generally refers to elites taking increasingly extreme positions (Sartori 1962), and it is usually used to describe ethnic or nationalist party politics (e.g., Chandra 2005; Horowitz 1985; Rabushka and Shepsle 1972, 151).[2] In conflict studies, however, it has come to mean militant groups engaging in increasingly violent tactics to distinguish themselves from others.

Mia Bloom (2004, 2005) introduced outbidding to terrorism studies to explain suicide terror, joining a lively debate on the subject (Atran, 2003; Crenshaw 2007; Moghadam, 2003; Pape, 2003; Pedazhur, 2005). Bloom argues that suicide terrorism is a tactical innovation that occurs when militant groups are competing for public support, and looking for ways to stand out. Whether groups turn to, and continue to use, suicide terror depends on whether they think the public will accept or reject the tactic's use (Bloom 2005).

The idea of outbidding as violence apparently has been useful to students of terrorism, because Bloom's article and book together have been cited more than 1,000 times. In addition to suicide terror, outbidding has been applied to other violent outcomes as well. Scholars have explored how outbidding can lead to more terrorism (Nemeth 2013), new terrorist groups (Chenoweth 2010), and more "severe" attacks such as targeting

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[2] Kaufman (1996, 109) argues that endogenous processes of outbidding, mass ethnic hostility, and security dilemma could spiral into ethnic war. However, like previous authors, he describes outbidding as increasingly extreme nationalist positions. After Bloom, other scholars describe outbidding as escalating levels of violence (e.g., Nemeth 2013).

civilians more than government targets (Conrad and Greene 2015). More generally, Kydd and Walter (2006) argue that outbidding is one of the principal strategies of terrorism.

Beyond terrorism studies, scholars of civil war often draw on outbidding and cite Bloom's work as they study spoiler processes, group fragmentation, and other dynamics of civil conflict (Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour, 2012; Fortna, 2015; Pearlman, 2009; Stanton 2013). The concept of outbidding seems to be one of the rare cases of a concept popularized in the terrorism literature catching on in other fields.

Scholars continue to test the outbidding hypothesis and related arguments, building on the work of those before them. Some studies find mixed or little support for the idea that competition between groups leads to suicide terror, or more terrorism (Brym and Araj, 2008; Findley and Young, 2012; Fortna, 2015; Stanton, 2013). Other results are more consistent with the outbidding hypothesis (e.g., Chenoweth, 2010). Nemeth (2013) finds that the impact of competition is conditional on group ideology: competition is associated with more violence among nationalist and religious groups, but less violence among leftist groups.

Studies increasingly use the outbidding hypothesis to explain outcomes beyond terrorism rates, and have found results consistent with the argument. Chenoweth (2010) finds competition not only associated with increased terrorism, but also the emergence of new terrorist groups. Conrad and Greene (2015) show that competition leads to more shocking kinds of terrorism, such as attacking civilian instead of government targets. Competition can encourage groups to innovate and eventually survive longer than they

otherwise would have (Phillips, 2015a).[3] Competition is especially associated with group longevity for the "top dog" group in a country (Young and Dugan, 2014).

Research on outbidding is likely to continue, as important questions remain. The effects of competition seem to be conditional on other factors. Findley and Young (2012) note that competition leads to suicide bombing in some countries, but not others. Part of the explanation could be that the group's political goals play a role (Nemeth 2013). Useful new directions for research include questions such as: (1) What other factors condition the effects of outbidding? (2) Beyond outcomes discussed above, what are other consequences of outbidding? (3) Aside from outbidding as an independent variable, what explains outbidding? (4) Is outbidding being measured adequately? Quantitative studies often capture outbidding simply with the presence of multiple terrorist groups in a geographic area. However, future research could use more precise measures.

Internal dynamics

A growing number of studies look comparatively at internal dynamics of terrorist organizations, as opposed to treating groups as unitary actors. Some of this research examines organizational structure, considering tradeoffs between loose networks and more hierarchical organizations. Other work in looks at group mobilization issues, such as recruiting and fundraising.

Terrorist groups vary substantially in their internal organizational structure, and this can have important implications for group behavior. It has been argued that the network structure – loosely-connected cells instead of a hierarchical chain of command – is

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[3] On groups innovating because of interactions with the government, instead of other terrorist groups, see Kenney (2007).

increasingly common for terrorists (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Sageman, 2004). As a result, a wave of research looking at so-called "dark networks" has applied social network analysis to individual terrorists (Carley, 2006; Everton, 2012; Raab and Milward, 2003).[4] One criticism of this line of work is that focusing on networks of individual terrorists, independently of formal group membership, overlooks the importance of formal organizations and organizational processes (e.g., Helfstein, 2009). Indeed, this was the source of a debate between two prominent terrorism scholars, regarding the nature of the al Qaeda threat (Sageman and Hoffman, 2008).

Many scholars are also using network or organizational studies approaches to understand dynamics within formal terrorist organizations. Understanding the structure of terrorist organizations contributes to our knowledge of group leadership, communication, and other dynamics (Horgan and Taylor, 1997). Some scholars consider tradeoffs between the more decentralized cell-based structures and more hierarchical structures (Enders and Su, 2007, Helfstein and Wright, 2011a, 2011b; Pearson et al., 2015). There is said to be a security-effectiveness tradeoff across group types, where centralized groups are more effective with their violence, but less secure from counterterrorism efforts(Kilberg 2009, 2012). Accordingly, several studies find that hierarchical terrorist groups are more lethal (Heger, Jung, and Wong, 2012; Helfstein and Wright 2011b; Rowlands and Kilberg, 2009).[5] In spite of benefits of hierarchy, groups seem to be aware of the security-

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[4] The term "dark networks" is principally used by public administration scholars, to indicate that they are studying covert networks, as opposed to legal organizations such as government agencies. Scholars from other disciplines use network analysis for terrorists as well, but often without using the term "dark networks" (e.g., Krebs 2002; Perliger and Pedahzur, 2011).

[5] A somewhat related finding is that hierarchical state-sponsored militant groups are more likely to remain obedient to their sponsor, while decentralized groups are prone to break their commitment to their sponsoring state and attack it (Popovic 2015).

effectiveness tradeoff, as they are less likely to take a hierarchical form in states with better counterterrorism capacities (Kilberg 2012, 821).

Beyond the question of consequences of organizational structure, there are opportunities for additional research on related topics. Abrahms and Potter (2015) find that leadership deficits are associated with militant groups attacking civilians. How else do leadership types or issues affect group behavior? McCormick (2003) noted that there are a broad variety of terrorist decision-making processes, and that extant theoretical frameworks can be harnessed to help us better understand terrorist decision-making – but few scholars have taken up this challenge. Why do some groups adopt certain decision-making styles, and what are the effects of these decisions? How might internal structures of terrorist groups affect, for example, their relationships with states, including negotiation outcomes?

Mobilization, in terms of obtaining and keeping resources (such as personnel and funds), is crucial for terrorist organizations. Regarding membership, Shapiro (2013) argues that terrorist organization leaders face a fundamental challenge in trying to control their members while maintaining secrecy, in what he calls "the terrorist's dilemma." The issue of how terrorist groups find and keep recruits is an important one (Crenshaw, 1987, Della Porta, 1995, 2014). More recently, scholars have sought to understand why " foreign fighters" join groups in countries other than their own. Hegghammer (2011) explores the motivations of Muslim foreign fighters, and argues that their roots are in 1970s pan-Islamic thought, brought about by elite competition. He also finds that Western jihadists seem to prefer to join groups in foreign countries, and rarely return to attack in their home country (Hegghammer 2013). Once abroad, these foreign fighters play key roles in terrorist groups, such as media specialists or recruiters (Mendelsohn, 2011).

Another mobilization topic is female participation in terrorist organizations. Some studies seek to explain why groups try to recruit women, emphasizing issues such the tendency of security forces to overlook women as suspects (Cunningham 2003). Gonzalez-Perez (2006, 2008) notes differences in female participation rates between domestic and international groups, and argues that domestic groups are especially likely to accept women, and women are relatively interested in joining these groups, given that these organizations often address perceived oppression in their own country. International organizations, on the other hand, are less likely to recruit women for more than menial roles.[6] Other research focuses on what draws women to terrorist groups. Bloom (2011) argues that revenge is one of the important factors. Less studied have been the consequences of female participation in terrorist groups. How does higher female participation affect group behavior? Are these groups more tactically or strategically effective than relatively homogenous groups?

There is space for more research on terrorist group recruiting and retention strategies. For example, we know that group size – in terms of members – is one of the most important factors in explaining organizational lethality, civilian targeting, and endurance (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Asal et al., 2009; Asal et a. 2015; Gaibulloev and Sandler, 2014; Horowitz and Potter 2014). Some studies explore how repression affects mobilization (Bueno de Mesquita 2005b). However, we know little about why some types groups are better at drawing members than others.

Funding is also of clear importance for terrorist organizations. While terrorist ttacks are famously cheap (e.g., Richardson 2003), the violence nonetheless implies non-trivial

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[6] Interestingly, neither ideological nor religious orientations are associated with female participation, according to one study (Dalton and Asal 2011).

expenditures. Groups generally purchase weapons, for example, and many larger groups pay their members' salaries and even provide social services for the community they seek to represent. These dynamics are important for group discipline and ultimately success (Berman, 2011; Shapiro, 2013; Shapiro and Siegel, 2007).

Many terrorist groups obtain their funds through crime such as drug trafficking (Asal, Milward, and Schoon, 2015). This became increasingly common as Cold War-related funds dried up, and globalization made transnational black markets more feasible and lucrative (Shelley, 2014). However, terrorist groups have long used criminal means to fund themselves, from kidnapping to bank robberies to drug sales (e.g., Horgan and Taylor, 1999). Beyond engaging in crimes for fundraising, many terrorist organizations rely on donations – with varying degrees of coercion – from the wider community (Boylan 2015). A number of questions remain regarding terrorist group funding, including: Why do groups choose one funding type over another? What drives shifts from one funding type to another? What government policies, such as economic sanctions, have been effective at making terrorism funding more challenging?

Group termination

Terrorist group termination is one of the most-studied topics of organizational dynamics of terrorism in recent years, although the line of research could be more theoretically coherent or cumulative. Attention to terrorist group termination makes sense given interest in counterterrorism, and because so many groups have come and gone in recent decades. The availability of new data sources probably also plays a role. Terrorist group termination studies have roots in the late 1980s (Crenshaw, 1987, 1991; Oots, 1989; Ross and Gurr, 1989). Crenshaw (1991) applied her earlier work on organizational

dynamics to the study of organizational decline, showing that government policies are only a small part of why some groups give up terrorism or cease to exist. She analyzed 77 terrorist groups, and found that groups tended to end through government force, group disintegration, or the groups deciding to give up terrorism. Regarding giving up terrorism, Weinberg and Pedahzur's (2003) book explored relationships between terrorist groups and political parties, including when terrorists give up violence and become legal parties.[7]

Cronin (2006) provided a theoretical framework for group termination in an article, outlining seven ways that terrorist groups can end, and applying the typology to analysis of al Qaeda. The seven ways terrorist groups end, according to the analysis, are (1) capture or killing of the leader, (2) failure to transition to the next generation, (3) achievement of the group's aims, (4) transition to a legitimate political process, (5) undermining of popular support, (6) repression, and (7) transition from terrorism to other forms of violence (Cronin 2006, 17-18). A special issue of *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* looked at how criminology research can inform the study of "desistance from terrorism," analyzing why individuals and groups stop using terrorism (LaFree and Miller, 2008).

Some of the first global quantitative studies on terrorist group demise were made possible by the RAND-MIPT data on terrorist organizations. Jones and Libicki's (2008) monograph analyzed 648 groups and reached a number of interesting conclusions, such as reporting that only 7% percent of groups that ended did so as a result of military force. Cronin's book (2009), following up on the earlier article, analyzed hundreds of groups, and

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[7] See also Weinberg (2012).

provided rich qualitative evidence of the seven ending types. Both books applied their

findings to the case of al Qaeda.[8]

Both Jones and Libicki and Cronin draw on historical data to note the challenge that

religious groups are especially durable, but they also express some optimism regarding the

fact that religious terrorists rarely achieve their political goals. Jones and Libicki's (2008,

xvi-xvii) primary conclusion regarding al Qaeda is that military force alone is unlikely to

defeat the group, so they call for an end to the "war" on terror. They suggest policing and

intelligence are crucial. Cronin (2009 193-196) also argues for a more nuanced

counterterrorism approach. She suggests considering negotiations with some peripheral

elements of al Qaeda to fragment it, undercutting its popular support by pointing out

contradictions such as the group's civilian targeting, and avoiding overreaction to its

terrorist attacks.

Scholars continue to use global data, and more sophisticated statistical analysis, to

explore the question of terrorist group termination, and its flip side, group longevity (e.g.,

Blomberg et al., 2010; Carter, 2012a; Pearson et al., 2015; Suttmoeller et al., 2015). Some

of the studies seem oriented more toward introducing new independent variables, focusing

on the effects of single factors such as repression (Daxecker and Hess, 2013), terrorist

group alliances (Phillips, 2014), or state sponsorship (Carter, 2012a.) Others are more

broadly oriented, exploring many factors to see which models seem to explain group

survival best (Blomberg et al., 2011, Gaibulloev and Sandler, 2013).

A puzzle regarding terrorist group termination and longevity is that meta-analysis

suggests that few results are robust across multiple studies (Phillips 2018). Perhaps the

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[8] Studies tend to focus on especially-durable groups, but a valuable alternative approach is looking at short-lived groups to see why they failed to endure (e.g., de Graaf and Malkki 2010).

most consistent result is that groups with larger memberships are more likely to survive (e.g., Blomberg et al., 2011; Jones and Libicki, 2008; Phillips 2014). This is probably not surprising, but raises questions about what explains membership size. Several studies also find that intergroup relationships, cooperation and competition, are associated with group duration (Gaibulloev and Sandler 2013, Price 2012, Phillips 2014, Phillips 2015a). Two state variables, country population and poverty, are also often related to group longevity. Population is usually included as a control variable but has not been explored in depth as a substantively and theoretically-important factor. Regarding poverty, is likely that poorer countries do not have the resources to successfully eliminate groups, and that there are grievances present that help groups recruit.

Other theoretically relevant factors – the regime type of the country in which a group operates, or whether the group is motivated by religion or nationalism – are not consistently associated with group survival. These inconsistent findings suggest scholars need to think more about factors that should affect *groups*, instead of only relying on traditional determinants of terrorism generally.

One way research on group termination could advance would be to focus on particular ending types, instead of assuming the factors that explain one ending type also explain another. The few studies to look at determinants of diverse ending types have found quite different results for each form of termination (Carter, 2012a, Gaibulloev and Sandler, 2014). Future research could benefit from picking one theoretically interesting type of group termination, such as elimination by the government or internal dissolution, and try to narrow down factors that robustly explain it. Additionally, beyond searching for a general explanation of terrorist group survival (or a particular termination type), scholars could simply use survival analysis as one type of outcome of interest for various questions about

terrorist groups. For example, to explore consequences of leadership decapitation, group survival is a relevant dependent variable (Price, 2012).

New directions

This chapter has outlined a number of potential avenues for future research, such as analyzing outbidding with more nuance, bringing coherence to the study of terrorist group termination, and more empirical work on terrorist group funding. Here I review a few areas of organizational dynamics of terrorism that also deserve additional focus.

Because of space reasons, this chapter did not include much discussion of another aspect of organizational dynamics – groups' relationships with the state. This topic is arguably less "organizational," in that not all of it incorporates specific internal dynamics such as mobilization. However, some of the relevant work includes analysis of negotiations with groups (Bueno de Mesquita 2005a, Lapan and Sandler 1988, Zartman 2003) and state sponsorship (Bapat 2006, 2012; Byman 2005, 2008; Carter 2012a, 2015). Other relevant studies seek to understand consequence of counterterrorism policy (Enders and Sandler 1993), such as leadership removal (Johnston 2012, Jordan 2014, Price 2012). If one looks through the dominant terrorism journals and top field journals, rigorous analyses of policy are not as common as they could be. As more data on counterterrorism policies becomes available (e.g., Dugan and Chenoweth, 2012; Gill, Piazza and Horgan 2016; Smith and Walsh 2013), hopefully we will see more such analysis of these policies.

Another challenge in the literature is that empirical work does not engage sufficiently with the many important findings of the theoretical work on strategic interactions (Carter, 2012b). A few scholars, such as Bapat and Sandler, combine formal theory and empirical work, but this is relatively rare. Rigorously testing implications of

theoretical work on strategic interactions (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson 2007) is an important avenue for future research.

Perhaps the broadest challenge facing terrorism studies is insufficient dialogue with research on related topics. One example is civil war studies. Studies of terrorist group longevity can learn from and inform studies of civil war duration and termination. Studies of the causes of terrorism can learn from and inform studies of civil war onset. Studies of any organizational dynamic of terrorism can learn from and inform work on rebel groups in civil wars. Terrorism and civil war are distinct phenomena, but the overlaps suggest opportunities for enhanced research.

Overall, scholars have made substantial progress toward understanding terrorism through examining organizational dynamics. As the research progresses, hopefully it can gain more conceptual clarity, contribute to important theoretical debates in terrorism studies and beyond, and overall help build a more cumulative and cohesive research program.

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