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# PUBLIC SUPPORT AND (COUNTER) TERRORISM

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## Introduction

This chapter focuses on public support as a key resource that both terrorists and the state forces that oppose them must acquire and maintain if they are to achieve success. The general public, we will argue, is in the case of terrorist campaigns not merely a spectator on the sidelines but an active participant. The public is an actor that needs to be engaged, surprised, shocked and won over in order to bring closer the goals the terrorist group espouses (Boyla 2015; Siqueira and Sandler, 2006). To paraphrase Sluka (1989), terrorists may not need widespread active support, but they cannot survive the active hostility of their popular base. This applies equally to those attempting to counter terrorist activities. Without a degree of support and a larger measure of at least acquiescence, counterterrorism policies are unlikely to succeed, irrespective of whether they reflect a 'soft' or 'hard' approach.

Both violent non-state actors and the authorities tasked with opposing them have long recognized the importance of public support (Silke, 2000). Mao Tse-tung likened guerrillas to fish for whom the people formed the sea. According to al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'in the absence of [popular support], the Islamic mujahid movement would be crushed' (Stohl, 2006). The idea of 'the people' as key to victory in armed conflict has also been emphasized in treatises on how to deal with insurrectionary war (Kitson, 1971; Thompson, 1966). More recently, Smith (2006) has argued that modern warfare has entered a new paradigm of 'war amongst the people'; conflicts in which the distinction between combatants and non-combatants is increasingly difficult to make and which predominantly take place in urban settings rather than battlefields. With regard to military doctrine, the U.S. Army's counterinsurgency field manual FM 3-24 places central importance on the role of the population, heralding a shift from enemy-centric counterinsurgency to a population-centric approach (Petraeus and Amos, 2006).[1]

Despite such broad recognition for the importance of public support in terrorism-related conflicts, the topic has received relatively little academic attention (Boylan, 2015; Malthaner and Waldmann, 2014). This chapter provides an overview of research on the link between public support and (counter) terrorism. It begins with a discussion of how to understand the relationship between public support and (counter) terrorism. This is followed by a look at how such support can be gained as well as the forms it can take. The chapter then expands on how public

support is able to influence the efficacy of (counter) terrorist campaigns and what makes this factor so relevant to understanding success or failure in the fight against terrorism.

## Conceptualizing public support for terrorism

In an attempt to understand the constitutive features of war, Carl von Clausewitz identified a now famous 'trinity' of politics, the armed forces and the people (Von Clausewitz, 1993).[2] This trinity has become a source of controversy, with critics arguing that Clausewitz's notion of war is too state-centric to be applicable to contemporary armed conflicts in which non-state actors such as insurgents and terrorists play important roles (Kaldor, 2010). Clausewitz, however, was very much cognizant of different types of warfare, such as the guerrilla campaign waged against Napoleon's troops in Spain, and there is now considerable support for the idea that the trinity can be adapted to study the violence of non-state actors as well (Daase, 2007; Duyvesteyn, 2005). Whether state, terrorist organization or insurgent group, in all cases a distinction can be made between a leadership element, front-line fighters and the people who constitute the active and passive base of support.

In interstate war, the opposing sides can each be described by their separate trinities of people, armed forces and government. Terrorism, however, is a form of warfare characterized by a significant degree of overlap with regard to the 'people' element of the combatants' respective trinities. Outside of a core group of committed supporters and a larger segment of those who provide passive assistance, what Malthaner and Waldmann (2014) have termed the 'radical milieu' from which terrorist groups emerge, both the state and its non-state challengers vie for the support of the same group of people: the uncommitted masses (Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, 2009). In 'irregular' conflicts, the people are not just bystanders or victims but a resource of crucial importance to all combatants.

A distinction can be made both in the types of popular support and the means by which it is acquired (Boylan, 2015; Browne and Silke, 2011; Paul, 2009). First, it can be active or passive. While both governments and non-state actors need to avoid engendering outright hostility, for the latter in particular the degree of active support required depends on the aims being pursued and whether violence is seen as acceptable means. Executing a campaign of terrorist violence does not necessarily require a particularly large number of active supporters. On the other hand, violent non-state actors who seek to wrestle political power and territorial control from the state cannot do without active support from large segments of the population (Le Blanc, 2013).

With regard to *how* popular support can be attained, Boylan (2015) distinguishes between enticement and coercion. In the latter case, terrorists simply demand a population's support through the use of intimidation or outright violence. Enticement can take several forms; terrorists may provoke state forces to overreact in an attempt to garner support from a population or engage in daring and dramatic attacks such as suicide bombings for similar ends (Atran, 2009). Research by Bloom (2004) indicates that in situations where multiple terrorist groups vie for the support of the same population base, these groups may also attempt to 'outbid' their rivals through spectacular attacks or engage in direct violence with their competitors.[3] Finally, groups with sufficient resources may also provide social services (e.g. Hamas, Hezbollah) or even complete social and political alternatives to reigning governments in the areas under their control (e.g. Mao's revolutionary forces, Peru's Shining Path) that, at least initially, can attract considerable supporters. Of the two routes to acquiring popular support, enticement appears to be preferential, as research indicates that ruling by consent is a more sustainable route to political power (Dahl, 1965).

The type of support a terrorist group can count on should be taken into account when designing counterterrorism policies (Boylan, 2015). Support garnered through violence and intimidation may be relatively easier to disrupt than that which is given voluntarily, provided the authorities can guarantee the safety of those who would abandon this forced allegiance. As the recent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, providing such guarantees is especially difficult when operating on foreign soil for a (relatively) limited period of time. Furthermore, dealing with active and passive supporters effectively is likely to require approaches specifically tailored to these different groups (Faria and Arce, 2005). The remainder of this chapter will focus on some of the various ways in which states can combat terrorism, using historical examples to illustrate how such measures can influence the distribution of popular support for the government and its non-state challengers.

## Counterterrorism and popular support

A state facing a serious and concerted terrorist campaign has several courses of action open to it. First, a general distinction in counterterrorism responses can be made between the war model, adopted, for example, in the campaign against al-Qaeda, and the criminal justice model, followed in many cases of domestic terrorism (Ganor, 2005; Weinberg, 2008). More specifically, five different categories of counterterrorism policies can be distinguished. A state can decide to do nothing; it can attempt to conciliate its opponents, for instance through socioeconomic measures or negotiations; it can expand the legal means available to prosecute terrorism; it can rely on the police and intelligence services to restrict terrorists' ability to operate; or it can utilize outright violence (Miller, 2007).

In practice, there are few examples of states doing nothing after a terrorist attack. The Italian government's initial response to the domestic terrorism that flared up in the late 1960s was decidedly lacklustre, yet this does not appear to have been a consciously chosen strategy but rather the result of an underestimation of the terrorist threat (Meade, 1990). Indeed, more generally there is often too much political pressure for a state to let the use of violence by non-state actors go unanswered (Mueller, 2005). Public support can be gained or strengthened by acting, and when confronted by terrorism, a government's support among its citizens is often best served by being seen to respond forcefully (Malvesti, 2003).

A conciliatory counterterrorism strategy can be a hard sell for governments. For instance, most will claim never to negotiate with terrorists even if in reality many of them do (Toros, 2008). Contacts can range from top-secret, small-scale encounters between security service personnel and terrorists, to conferences at which high-level government officials negotiate directly with terrorist leaders or their representatives. The concessions being negotiated can range from the relatively small, such as an exchange of prisoners, to attempts at long-term conflict resolution. Whether such deals come to fruition is not only dependent on the skill of the negotiators or their ability to build rapport with their enemies. Crucially, both sides are limited in the concessions they can make by the degree to which these will be acceptable to their respective constituents. The assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 by a right-wing extremist and the suicide attacks carried out by Palestinian terrorist groups illustrate the extreme degrees of opposition that conciliatory policies can engender (Barak, 2005).

When faced with terrorism, politicians and citizens frequently call for broader powers for the police and the criminal justice system. In the early 1980s, the Italian government enacted legal reforms that made it possible for terrorists who surrendered to the authorities, confessed their crimes and provided information on comrades still at large, to receive significantly reduced sentences. These measures were highly controversial, yet the 'penitence laws' were very effec-

tive against the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*, BR), a left-wing terrorist group that had been responsible for hundreds of attacks since the late 1960s (Weinberg, 2007). However, when similar measures were used by the British authorities against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), their longer-term impact was negligible. The so-called 'supergrass trials' of the early 1980s failed to significantly degrade the PIRA's ability to operate (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). How can such similar counterterrorism approaches yield such disparate results?

In Italy, the BR's increasingly indiscriminate violence had isolated it from even its most ardent supporters. The organization was also suffering from an increasing number of its members being arrested or killed. To many of those who were left, the penitence laws represented a last and only way out (Hewitt, 1990; Weinberg, 2007). The PIRA, on the other hand, continued to enjoy significant levels of grassroots support and remained a viable organization as a result. In turn, the number of potential informants was lower; those who turned 'supergrass' were often first captured and induced to talk in order to avoid long sentences, rather than people who came forward on their own volition. While certainly not the only factor at play, public support was arguably a crucial determinant of why legal reforms worked in Italy but largely failed in the fight against the PIRA (Hewitt, 1990; Hoffman and Morrison Taw, 1992; Moxon-Browne, 1981).

The use of the police and intelligence services to restrict terrorists' freedom of operation has also been a frequently employed course of action. The state stands to gain when it successfully identifies and apprehends terrorist suspects and rounds up terrorist cells in a lawful and legitimate fashion. For instance, research by Tyler *et al.* (2010) on counterterrorism policing in the United States has demonstrated that Muslim Americans are more likely to lend their cooperation when such policies are perceived as legitimate and fair. Conversely, excessive and abusive powers of the intelligence services can produce a significant backlash. The revelations by Edward Snowden in June 2013, but also the COINTELPRO scandal in the 1970s, demonstrated that these powers need to be carefully used to be effective. Perceived excesses on behalf of its security services or police forces can cost the state dear in public support for its counterterrorist operations.

The use of outright violence to counter terrorism is frequently associated with the deployment of military forces. Again, public support is a crucial variable determining the efficacy of this course of action. The Vietnam War demonstrated that insufficient public support 'at home' can fatally undermine the effective utilization of military means. In the context of a counterterrorist campaign, no less important is the way in which potential supporters of the terrorist group being targeted view the use of military power. Assassinating terrorist leaders ('targeted killing') may have temporary tactical utility, but groups targeted in this fashion have proven remarkably resilient. Dead terrorists can be venerated as martyrs and become rallying points for continued resistance and recruitment. Furthermore, the inevitable collateral damage that accompanies the use of the military instrument can seriously undermine a government's legitimacy, lead to increased support for its violent non-state challengers, engender a desire for revenge and thus keep all sides locked in an escalating spiral of violence (Byman, 2006; Carvin, 2012). As Stohl (2006) argues, the ways in which audiences react to counterterrorism policies can be as important as the short-term benefits provided by the elimination of particular terrorists or terrorist capabilities.

The previous paragraphs suggest that counterterrorism measures' effectiveness is less dependent on the type of measures employed than on their impact on the configuration of public support for both the state and its violent non-state challenger. As various scholars have pointed out, in the cases where terrorists were successful in attaining their stated goals, they enjoyed a significant measure of public support (Charters, 1994; Cronin, 2006; Paul, 2010; Schuurman,

2013; Wood, 2010). A primary consideration for states facing a terrorist challenger would therefore be to design and implement measures intended to maintain as much popular support whilst minimizing that of their opponent (De Mesquita, 2005). However, an important qualification is that most of these findings apply to (nominally) democratic states. Authoritarian regimes may be less affected by the need to maintain popular legitimacy (Byman, 2016). In fact, some scholars have pointed to the Russian intervention in Chechnya as an example of a successful counter-terrorism operation that relied exclusively on all-out repression (Mandel, 2015; Zhukov, 2012).

## Characteristics of public support and the perception of legitimacy

Public support is often difficult to gauge, particularly in times of crisis or civil conflict. Public support can be measured by looking at opinion polls, sentiments expressed in the media or turn-out in demonstrations or elections. Recruitment potential in the security forces might also provide an indication of support. When terrorists and counterterrorist forces are in competition over the support of the general public, an important precondition for gaining and maintaining such support seems to be the degree to which the political actors are perceived to be *legitimate*. Terrorists need to prove that their claims to legitimacy are strong and credible. They can appeal to the lack of legitimacy of their opponent but may also appeal to particular group-based identities or grievances to substantiate such claims. At least initially, the state is generally at an advantage in this regard, as its authority has frequently been established for decades or centuries, enabling powerful claims to legitimacy based on precedent, tradition or nationhood.

Actions that substantiate these legitimacy claims are equally significant in the struggle for popular support. Here terrorists often run into the limitations of what Neumann and Smith (2007) have called the escalation trap. The continued need to raise the level of violence to garner attention and demonstrate resolve and capability will be curbed by the maximum level of force that the terrorist's intended audience is willing to support for the cause being pursued. Terrorist and counterterrorist forces are prone to miscalculate the type of measures or the degree of violence their respective constituents are willing to stomach. Public support has a qualitative aspect which imposes limitations on the types of violent behaviour those who wish to acquire or maintain this support can engage in (Schuurman, 2013).

On 21 July 1972, 'Bloody Friday', the PIRA detonated 26 bombs in Belfast's city centre, an act of terrorism that was perceived to be so indiscriminate that a public outrage ensued. The temporary lapse in popular support for the PIRA created a window of opportunity for the British forces to launch a large-scale military operation (Bennett, 2010). Similarly, when the Quebecois terrorist group FLQ, fighting for the Canadian province's independence, murdered two politicians in October 1970, they rose to a level of violence that the majority of their supporters were simply not willing to countenance. Support for the group appeared to plummet almost overnight, while the previously embattled Canadian authorities suddenly found themselves empowered by a popular mandate to pursue a more strident counterterrorism approach (Parker, 2007).

Essentially the same sequence of events led to the BR's loss of public support in the late 1970s. A second generation of militants had come to prominence in the middle of that decade who oversaw an expansion of violence both in terms of the number of attacks and those who were targeted. This led to several grievous miscalculations, including the infamous murder of statesman Aldo Moro in 1978 and the killing of communist and trade-union member Guido Rossa in 1979. Thousands of Italians, including those whose political leanings had previously made them sympathetic towards the BR, were outraged and took to the streets to demonstrate against the terrorist organization. The widespread loss of popular support that the BR suffered

as a result made it increasingly vulnerable to the authorities' counterterrorism policies, and it was against this background that the penitence laws described earlier could have their effect (De Graaf, 2011).

Davis *et al.* (2012) and Reed (2013) are some of the authors who show that violence against civilians can undermine popular support for non-state actors. As the examples given above suggest, this conclusion might be amended with the qualification that it is not the use of violence against civilians per se that can produce such a loss of support, but rather that this occurs only when that violence is *perceived to be* excessive or indiscriminate. State forces are by no means exempt from the risk that an excessive use of force will result in a critical loss of popular support. Numerous authors warn that overreaction to a terrorist attack or an insufficiently discriminate use of force to combat terrorism can delegitimize state forces, increase the appeal of the terrorist groups, engender a desire for revenge and thus produce an escalation of conflict-related violence levels (Kalyvas, 2006; Parker, 2007; Silke, 2005).[4] In short, public support for both terrorists and counterterrorist forces can be seen as setting boundaries for the measures that these opposing sides can use, beyond which they risk a loss of legitimacy. These boundaries, however, are liable to expand or contract as the conflict develops.

Responsible for these shifts in the configuration of public support are the interaction between terrorists and counterterrorists and the passage of time. It is clear from the Clausewitzian conception of war that neither side fights in a vacuum but that both face thinking, adaptive opponents who will react to each other's moves while planning their own. This interaction can have a considerable effect on the distribution of public support for the combatants. When one side is perceived to use excessive force or illegitimate means, public support for the other combatant is likely to undergo a qualitative shift towards a position where more violence, or violence of a less discriminate nature, can be used without the risk of losing popular standing. Because these effects are reciprocal, an escalation dynamic is born that can increase conflict-related violence levels (Schuurman, 2013).

In both Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' and the decades' old Israeli–Palestinian conflict, negotiations intended to reach a long-term settlement did not occur until significant war-weariness had set in among the combatants.[5] This resembles an argument made by Zartman (2001), which holds that states and violent non-state actors will both prefer unilateral victory to any negotiated settlement. Only when a 'mutually hurting stalemate' sets in and both sides realize that they will not be able to achieve strategic military victory do negotiations become a serious alternative. Whether or not concessions or negotiations will form an effective means for ending terrorism-related conflicts therefore appears to depend to a significant degree on the public's perception of whether a one-sided victory is possible.

## Conclusion

Public support is widely understood to be an important resource both for terrorists or insurgents and the governments they oppose. This chapter sought to explore what public support is and how it influences the course of terrorism-related conflicts. Utilizing Clausewitz's trinitarian view of war, public support was conceptualized as a key resource over which state and non-state actors compete. An important difference between interstate 'conventional' war and intrastate 'irregular' war is that whereas the former is characterized by two or more sides with their own populations, the latter is frequently fought among, against and ultimately for the same population. Public support for terrorists and governments can be further conceptualized as consisting of an inner circle of core supporters, a broader group that provides passive assistance and a large 'outer circle' of people whose support is to be gained; either through voluntary enticement or coercive means.

Success for either state or non-state actors in a violent conflict becomes highly unlikely when they are faced with pervasive outright hostility. Yet public support is a resource whose value varies with the goals being pursued and the type of regime or non-state organization pursuing them. Democratic states are likely to be more heavily reliant on public support than non-democratic ones. Groups pursuing a campaign of terrorism are far less reliant on widespread active support than insurgents attempting to gain political power and territorial control. Despite such important variations, it seems clear that public support empowers those who manage to attain it. Crucially, however, public support appears to come with a qualitative dimension that determines whether certain terrorist acts or counterterrorism measures are seen as legitimate.

Public support provides states and terrorists with a mandate to act, providing room for manoeuvre but also setting boundaries to what is seen as the legitimate pursuit of shared goals. When terrorists escalate to a quantity or quality of violence deemed excessive by their (potential) supporters, they risk triggering a (temporary) loss of legitimacy that can empower their government opponents. Vice versa, when states enact controversial counterterrorism measures, and especially when they are perceived as using excessive force, public support could shift in favour of their non-state adversaries; creating opportunities for an escalation of violence and setting in motion events that can prolong the conflict. The perception of legitimacy appears to be a key determinant of (counter) terrorist success.

These findings have ramifications for the effectiveness of counterterrorism policies, as they suggest that it is not so much *what* is done that matters, but rather that priority should be ascribed to making sure these actions are *perceived to be legitimate*. Furthermore, the ability of public support to influence (counter) terrorism effectiveness also has implications for *when* certain measures can be effectively employed; conciliatory policies, for instance, may not be effective until a certain measure of war-weariness has set in on all sides. In short, when trying to understand the development of terrorism-related conflicts or when trying to design and implement effective counterterrorism measures, the quality, quantity and distribution of public support among conflict parties should be given due consideration.

In closing, a caveat to be made is that the present chapter has predominantly focused on (nominally) democratic regimes in Europe, North America and the Middle East (Israel). Most Western democratic governments can count on a base-level of popular support that may be considerably reduced or even absent in other parts of the world. How does such a markedly different initial distribution of popular support among the warring parties influence the conflict's development and outcome? Additional research on popular support's influence on terrorism-related conflicts, especially in non-democratic parts of the world, is just one of many promising areas for future research on this important yet relatively little-studied topic.

## Acknowledgements

## Notes

1 Vennesson (2011) challenges the view that the people are important in war. He argues that with the overall decline in armed conflict and the generally restrained nature of violence, the role of 'the people' both in politics and war has entered a downward slope.
2 Please note that Clausewitz's original or primary trinity consisted of reason, passion and chance. For the sake of the argument, we will limit ourselves here to what is formally considered his 'secondary' trinity.
3 When terrorist or insurgent groups compete for popular support, the mechanisms of intimidation and outbidding make the use of indiscriminate violence against civilians more likely (Kalyvas, 2006).

4  For a contrarian view, see Downes (2007) and Byman (2016).
5  This view is not without its critics. See Tonge *et al.* (2011).

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