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Understanding the Rationality of Terrorism

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While many people like to think of terrorists as irrational fanatics, research has shown this to be inaccurate for most individual terrorists¹ and especially for the terrorist group as a whole.² As rational organizations, terrorist groups operate in environments containing various incentives and constraints, and must calculate their actions accordingly if they are to be successful. Could their actions be too violent? Or not violent enough? What level of violence is rational for terrorists to use? How much is too much and how much is too little? What happens if they use “too much” or “too little” violence? Also, how can the state manipulate the rationality of terrorist violence to make it less rational for the terrorists? This paper explores these and other questions by attempting to think more systematically about the various consequences of different levels of terrorist violence – consequences for the state, the population, and the terrorists themselves. This is not a theoretical paper trying to explain *why* terrorists choose or execute a particular level of violence; rather, it is a heuristic model that tries to capture all the possible nuances, permutations, and consequences of various levels of terrorist violence. In this way it is more of a theory of how terrorism is socially constructed by the population of the state and how the “rationality” of particular levels of terrorist violence and the social construction of what these levels of violence mean changes over time as populations adapt (or not) to living in a world of terror.

At the most fundamental level, terrorism is the gap between the actual level of violence and the level of violence that the population accepts (Figure 1).

¹ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, citing Jerold Post’s research.

² See Robert Pape, *Dying to Win*.

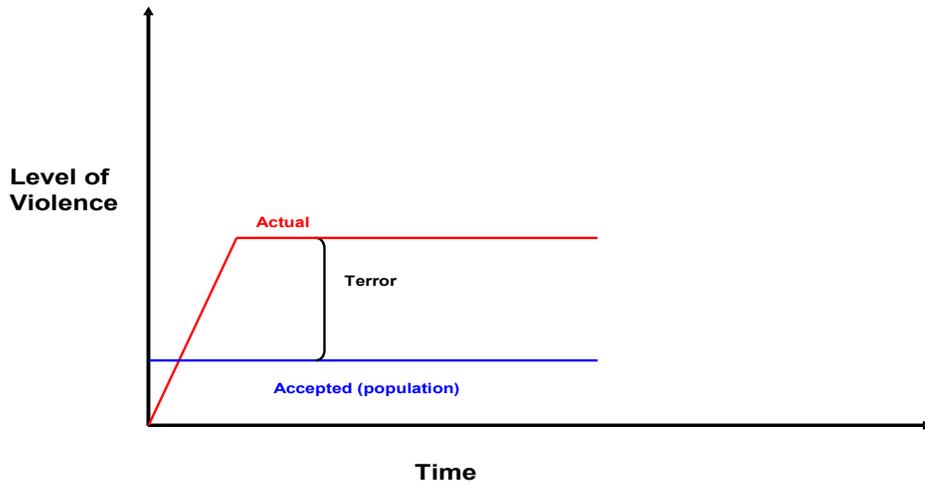


Figure 1

This “accepted” level of violence refers to the amount of violence that a population will tolerate before it demands that the government “do something” to stop it. Of course, any population will desire that the level of violence is at zero, but they will usually tolerate some low level of violence (and maybe only a small amount above zero) before they insist that the government changes its behavior, strategies, or policies to mitigate the violence. For example, a few minor attacks per year by a group that result in a handful of casualties and minimal damage are unlikely to provoke much of a response (Figure 2).

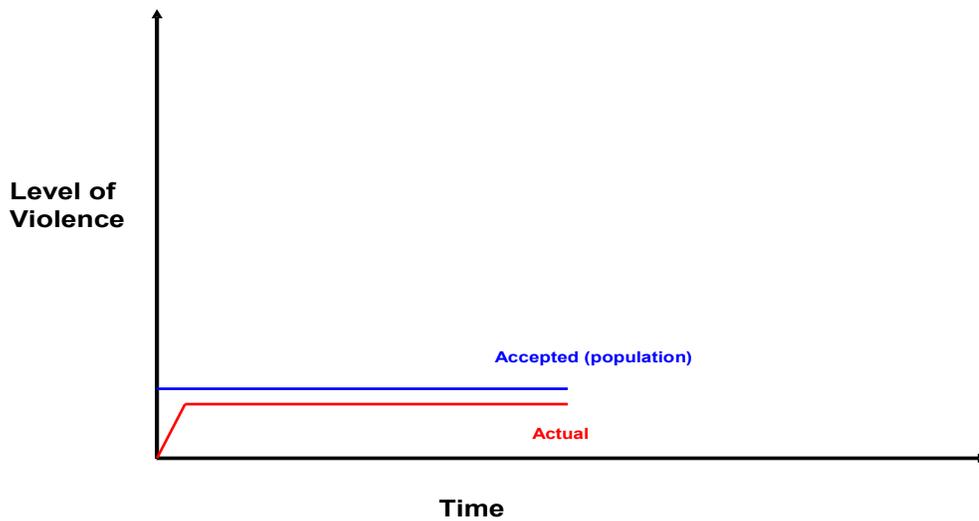


Figure 2

This is because, even though the “actual” level of violence is higher than zero, it does not exceed the level of “accepted” violence and so does not invoke the psychological condition of terror. This situation occurred in Canada during the 1960s when the Front du Liberation de Quebec conducted some minor attacks that resulted in a few injuries and a handful of accidental deaths.³ While the Canadian government responded to these attacks by investigating and imprisoning many FLQ members, the attacks were not severe enough to cause the population to demand that the state rethink its strategies, policies, organizational design, etc.

In contrast, when terrorists groups execute a level of violence that exceeds the population’s accepted level of violence, they create the condition of terror that they are trying to achieve (Figure 1 again). Importantly, the greater the gap between the actual

³ Michael Freeman, *Freedom or Security*, Praeger: 2003, p. 118.

and accepted levels of violence, the greater the terror created by the violence. Clearly, the 9/11 attacks created a level of violence that far exceeded what the population of the United States found acceptable. Because the gap between the actual and acceptable levels was so wide, the amount of terror was correspondingly large. As a result, the government of the United States government altered and enhanced its strategies, focus, distribution of resources, organizational structures, and official rhetoric (read: the “global war on terror”) to combat terrorism. Similarly, when the FLQ escalated its level of violence in 1970 by kidnapping two officials, this raised their level of actual violence above the population’s level of accepted violence. As a result, the Canadian government responded more vigorously, used emergency powers (the War Measures Act), and brought in the military to provide security in Montreal and Quebec.⁴

One of the central dynamics to this paper is that, over time, people might get used to terrorism (Figure 3).

⁴ Michael Freeman, *Freedom or Security*, Praeger: 2003, p. 121-123.

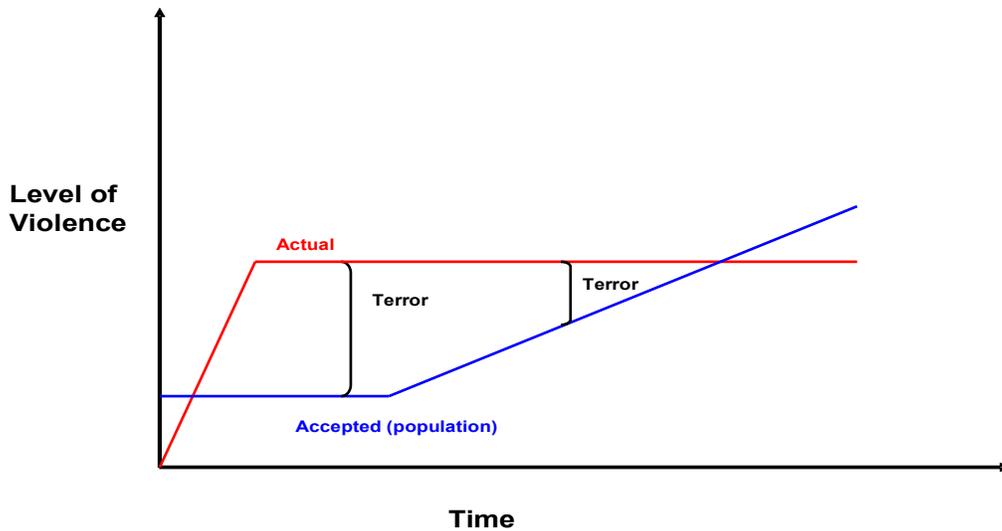


Figure 3

This is based on the observation that people sometimes adapt to their surroundings and revise their expectations according to events. (ADD PSYCHOLOGY LITERATURE)

When faced with a continuous campaign of terrorism violence, populations may start to revise their expectations of what is “normal.” This seems to be the case in countries like Israel, Northern Ireland, Colombia, Iraq, and others, where populations expectations of terrorist violence has changed over time. As the scholar Ian Raeder notes, “the explosion of bombs is something we (at least in the UK, because of recurrent IRA bombing campaigns of past decades) have become used to.”⁵ This “getting used to it” also seems to be happening in terms of how Americans view the numbers of casualties in Iraq.

According to a Pew Research Center report, the American public has become less aware

⁵ Ian Raeder, “Spectres and Shadows: Aum Shinrikyo and the Road to Megiddo,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2002), 14:1, p. 155.

of casualties in Iraq and less accurate in estimating the total number deaths. For the first 4 years of the war, the American public estimated the number of troop deaths correctly about 50% of the time. In the spring of 2008, only 28% of Americans polled correctly estimated the number of casualties. Although the rate of casualties remained relatively constant, the media coverage and the population's attention to the war began to wane.⁶ To put it simply again, people become inured to the violence. What this means on the figure above is that over time, faced with a continuous campaign of terrorism, the accepted level of violence by the population will rise as they get used to terrorism. Once again, this does not mean that the population *wants* more violence, just that the amount of violence required to create a condition of terror is higher. Because the population becomes used to violence, the gap between the actual and accepted levels of violence will shrink and the amount of terror (which is the size of this gap) will correspondingly shrink as well. Over time, then, terrorist violence actually loses its effectiveness. If it terrorizes the population less, the terrorist group will be less likely to be able to coerce the state in the way that it desires. This is the "optimistic" scenario: that terrorism has a limited lifespan of effectiveness, or something of a chemical half-life. Eventually, it is possible that the population's accepted level of violence may even exceed the actual level of violence. When this occurs, acts of violence no longer have the capacity to terrorize the population. Actual terrorist-executed violence may be at a higher level, but the amount of psychological terror generated by it may still be low or even zero. This could then lead to the terrorist group abandoning its strategy of terror.

While this dynamic – of the declining ability of violence to terrorize – is the most optimistic possibility, the problem is that terrorist groups may recognize that this

⁶ Joseph Girodono, "Study: Public is less aware of Iraq casualties," Stars and Stripes, March 14, 2008, p. 4.

dynamic is occurring and react accordingly. In other words, this dynamic creates pressure and incentives on terrorists groups to escalate their level of violence if they want to continue to create terror with their violence. This pressure for escalation was seen by al-Qaeda's desire to follow up the 9/11 attacks with a bigger subsequent attack. When al-Qaeda developed a plan to attack New York City subways with cyanide, al-Zawahari apparently called off the attacks because they were not sufficiently escalatory; they "would be viewed as a pale, even humiliating, follow-up to the 9/11 attacks."⁷ Whether or not the terrorist group in fact raises the level of violence depends on several factors: its own recognition of the declining capacity of violence to terrorize; the existence of some latent capacity that the terrorist group can mobilize for violence; and the desire to do so (Figure 4).

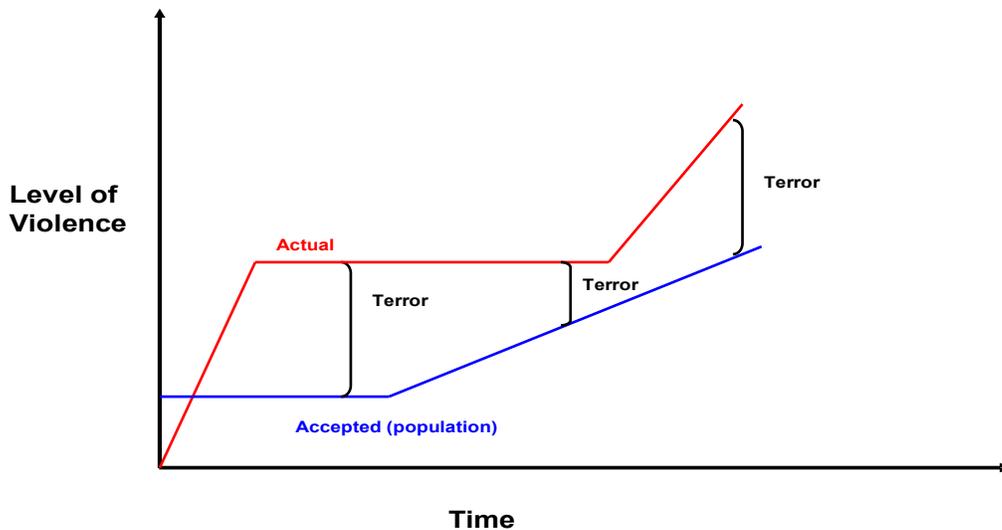


Figure 4

⁷ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Adapts Cold-War Idea to Fight Terrorists," New York Times, March 18, 2008.

If the group *does* have the desire and capacity, then the terrorist group will escalate its level of violence. If the terrorist group lacks the desire or capacity to escalate, it would continue (more or less) at the previous level of violence (Figure 3).

Just because the terrorist group sees the need to escalate, can it? Some groups may be operating at 100% capacity, while others may have latent capacity to exploit because they are operating at less than the full capacity of what they could be doing. If a terrorist group does escalate, it may mobilize unused or under-utilized resources, but it may run into a ceiling of how much violence it can execute as it approaches 100% efficiency. When this is the case (Figure 5), there may be a temporary surge in terrorist violence, but as the population's acceptance level continues to rise, the terrorists might be unable to continue to raise their level of violence.

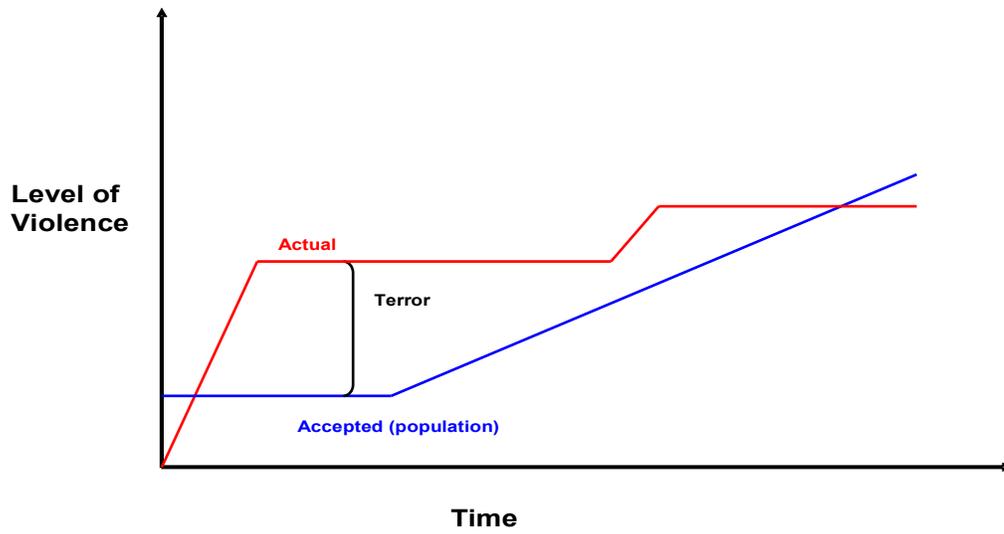


Figure 5

Over time again, terrorist violence will become less rational and terrorists may give up violence altogether if they realize this.

Another possibility is that terrorists may unilaterally decide to curtail much of their violence (Figure 6).

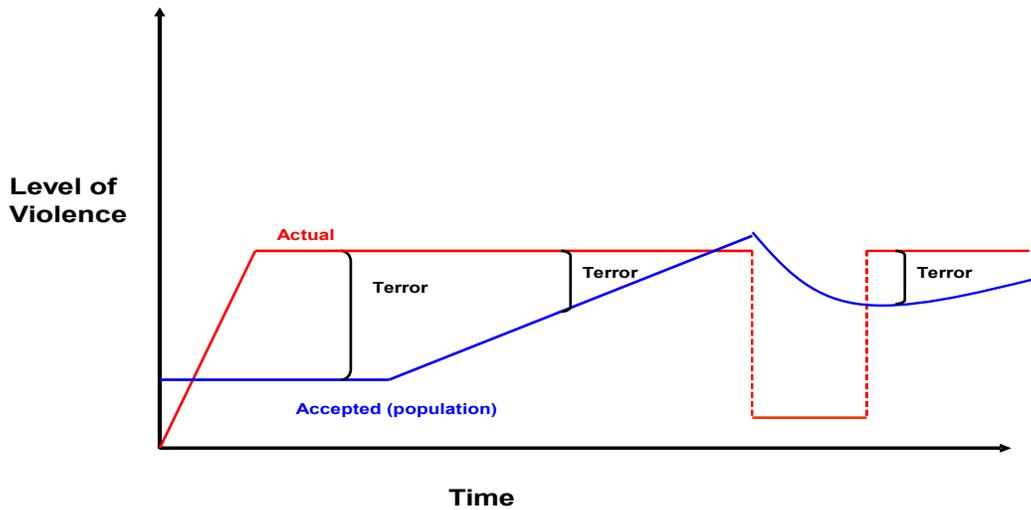


Figure 6

Faced with the decreasing effectiveness of their violence, a unilateral cease fire may be used to get the population to be less acceptant or less used to terrorism. In effect, a terrorist cease-fire would result in the population's level of accepted violence dropping back down so that future attacks can be more effective at "re-terrorizing" the population.

Another possibility is that terrorist groups can continue to escalate their level of violence more or less indefinitely (Figure 7).

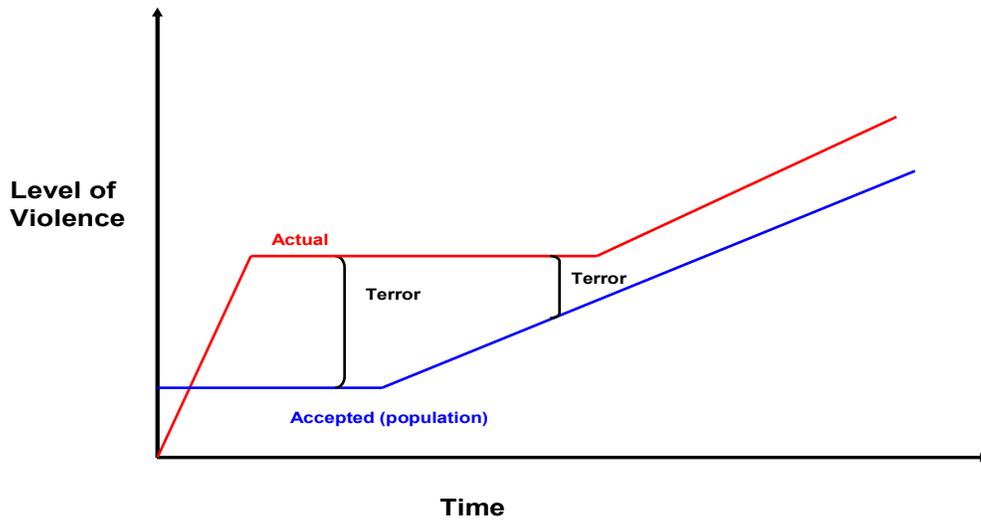


Figure 7

Beyond mobilizing latent or unused capacity, they may also be able to acquire new resources. They can recruit more members, raise more money, buy more weapons, etc. to be able to continually escalate the level of violence. This, in fact, is the “pessimistic” scenario – that the level of terrorist violence will get worse over time as terrorists keep raising the level of their violence to maintain the gap of terror over the population’s accepted level of violence.

At this point, though, there may be an additional variable or factor that comes into play. While terrorists have incentives to maintain a level of actual violence higher than what the population expects, they may also have upper bounds to how much violence they can perpetrate because they must take into account what their own constituency of sympathizers will accept (Figure 8).

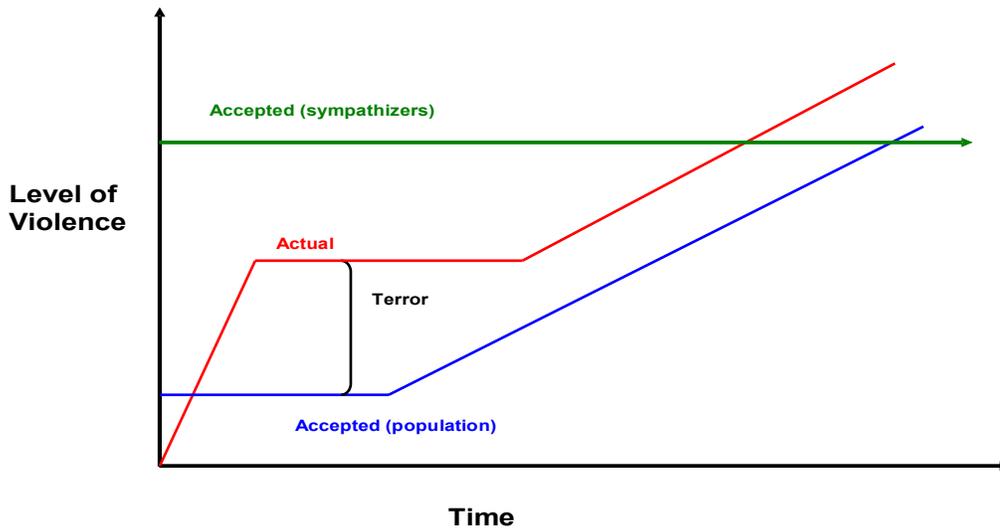


Figure 8

Many people think of terrorists as having no upper constraints on their use of violence; they will use as much violence as they can whenever they can. In fact, though, they have to maintain their legitimacy among their supporters. If the actual level of violence exceeds what their own supporters will accept, their supporters will turn away from the terrorists. As Giraldo and Trinkunas argue, “socially embedded groups have usually proved to be less likely to engage in behavior that their support group finds unacceptable – or if they do engage in such behavior, they risk extinction.”⁸ This is an important constraint on terrorist action and we see numerous examples of when terrorist groups cross this upper ceiling. The Omagh bombing in Northern Ireland in 1998, for example, went a long way towards discrediting the Real IRA. The high casualties from this attack

⁸ Jeanne Giraldo and Harold Trinkunas, “The Political Economy of Terrorism Financing,” in *Terrorism Financing and State Responses*, Giraldo and Trinkunas, eds., p. 14. They also note that, in some situations, the competition among terrorist groups for supporters may mean that the supporters may accept more violence than the terrorist group and will push them to escalate their violence.

(29 killed, over 200 wounded) cost the Real IRA much of its support and encouraged those like Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA who were seeking a more peaceful or political solution.⁹ Likewise, when Aum Shinrikyo conducted their 1995 Tokyo subway attack with sarin gas, many of their supporters, even including many of their own cult members, felt that Aum had crossed the line of what was acceptable and then abandoned the organization.¹⁰ As a final example, when the two independent FLQ cells in Quebec kidnapped two hostages in 1970, they initially enjoyed widespread support, but when one of the cells killed their hostage, Pierre Laporte, public sympathy evaporated.¹¹ After the 1970 crisis ended, the FLQ was never able to mobilize sympathizers in the same way.¹² A terrorist group in tune with its supporters will try to avoid crossing this line.

According to some thinking in the U.S. government, for example, “if the seeds of doubt can be planted in the mind of Al Qaeda’s strategic leadership that an attack would be viewed as a shameful murder of innocents...then the order may not be given.”¹³

In essence, terrorists must operate in the gap between the population’s level of accepted violence and their sympathizers’ level of accepted violence. These two lines provide the lower and upper bounds on the level of violence that will be rational for terrorists to use. Too little and the violence will not terrorize; too much and they will lose the backing of their own supporters. Also, working within these boundaries, terrorist would want to be as high in this gap as possible to create as much terror with their violence that they can.

⁹ Wikipedia entry for “Omagh.”

¹⁰ David Kaplan and Andrew Marshall, *The Cult at the End of the World*, 1996, p. 286.

¹¹ Michael Freeman, *Freedom or Security*, Praeger: 2003, p. 128.

¹² Michael Freeman, *Freedom or Security*, Praeger: 2003, p. 130.

¹³ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, “U.S. Adapts Cold-War Idea to Fight Terrorists,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2008.

An interesting possible dynamic may occur if the population becomes so accustomed or inured to violence that its accepted level rises close to or even higher than the sympathizers' accepted level of violence (Figure 8 as well). This is probably an unlikely scenario because we would expect that terrorist sympathizers will always be more tolerant of violence than the general population. However, if this scenario were to materialize, it would leave no room in which the terrorists could operate.

With the overall dynamics described above creating incentives for ever increasing levels of violence, where would the level of violence associated with weapons of mass destruction be? On the graphic, WMD is represented as a bracket to capture the idea that where this is in relation to other lines depends on the particular case or terrorist group (Figure 9).

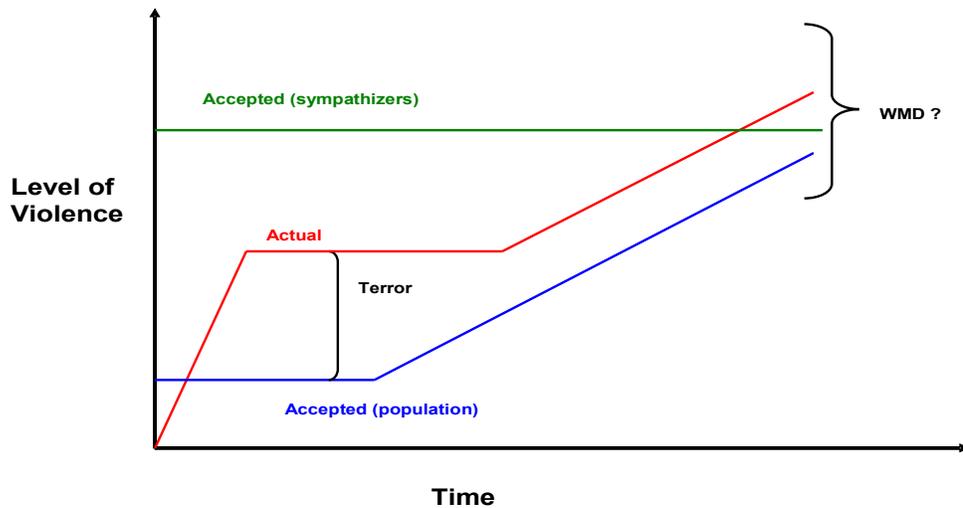


Figure 9

For many groups the WMD line would be well above what even their own supporters would accept. It is hard to conceive of the supporters of the Provisional IRA ever accepting the level of violence associated with WMD. Other groups, perhaps more apocalyptic ones like Aum Shinrikyo, have used WMD (sarin in this case) and could do so in the future. Al-Qaeda's possible acquisition and utilization of WMD has prompted much debate. Most of this debate focuses on whether or not they can acquire the weapons and whether or not they can be deterred from using them.¹⁴ This model, however, points to the possibility that al-Qaeda, or any other group, may be self-deterred by concerns over losing the support of their constituents if they go ahead and actually use WMD.¹⁵ If the actual violence created by WMD is higher than a terrorist group sympathizers' level of accepted violence, this may act as a constraint on their use. However, if the terrorist group misjudges the sympathizers' acceptance level, they may, unfortunately, use WMD even without the acceptance of their supporters. The subsequent loss of support will damage the terrorist organization, but would be too late to stop the actual use of WMD.

The various lines of violence and the dynamics and consequences of how they intersect have so far just been discussed in conceptual terms. For any given country, though, we can begin to assign real numerical values for these lines (or at least some estimates of the values). FUTURE RESEARCH ON EMPIRICS HERE.

Another insight that comes out of this model is that while the broad dynamics remain the same, different countries and terrorist groups will have different values for these lines. In Canada, again, the kidnapping of two individuals exceeded what the

¹⁴ Larry Arbuckle thesis at NPS

¹⁵ Will Browne thesis at NPS

population would accept (or so the government contended – this is debated), while the death of one kidnapped victim exceeded what the FLQ supporters would accept. Israel, in contrast, has faced a wave of terrorism since 2000 that far exceeded the level of violence in Canada. Yet the Israelis seem less “terrorized.” This is because the population has come to “accept” a certain amount of violence. To put it in the terms from the graph, in Canada, all three lines were relatively low. So even two kidnappings and one death was enough to terrorize the population and result in a loss of constituent support. In Israel, all three lines were much higher, but in comparison to Canada, the population’s level of acceptance was much closer to the level of actual violence. A similar story to that of Canada could be told about Japan, with the population’s and Aum members’ horror at the use of sarin. If the United States, on the other hand, had to face the consistent and high level of violence seen in Iraq or Israel, most people would assume that that level of violence would far exceed what our population would accept. Put simply, a suicide bombing a day is normal to the population of Iraq, but would create much more terror in the United States, at least initially. Some of these differences across countries may be due to cultural issues, such as how cultures value human life, but may also be a result of the country’s history and its experiences with violence and death.

Because this framework is meant as just a model for the consequences of terrorist violence, it simplifies many of the issues involved. Some of these simplifications, though, gloss over what may be interesting dynamics. For example, the accepted levels of violence by the sympathizers and by the populace are presented as aggregate measures. A state’s population, however, does not have some easily measurable level of accepted violence that holds true across all members of the state. Even within one country,

different people will accept different levels of violence. In fact, the disaggregation and disagreements over what a country would “accept” are central to much of the political debates over how to respond to terrorism. For example, in the United States, should the government take any means necessary to stop every last ounce of terrorism or is the protection of civil liberties paramount and worth the cost of having a little more terrorism? How this question is phrased and how it is answered reflect some of the disagreements within the United States over how much violence is “acceptable” and how much should be done to get it back to an acceptable level.

This aggregation of what is acceptable to the population is also mirrored in the aggregation of the supporters’ level of acceptance. They too will have disagreements over what constitutes an acceptable level of violence for the group they support. These internal debates provide an opportunity for the state to try to delegitimize violence for some portions of the population and will be discussed below.

Another interesting dynamic not captured by the simplifications of the diagram is that different kinds of violence and different targets of violence have varying consequences. As presented in the diagram, the actual level of violence is conceived as essentially a measure of deaths or damage caused by terrorism. But how people die and who dies matters as well. There may be a difference, for example, between the deaths of 220 Marines in Lebanon (out of 241 total deaths) and 186 children in a school in Beslan (out of 334 total deaths). Likewise, deaths resulting from the collateral damage of bombings are horrific, but less horrific than beheadings and deaths from torture. Also, for the supporters’ level of accepted violence, who commits the act is important. For

instance, terrorist groups might generate a negative backlash if they use women or mentally handicapped individuals as suicide bombers.

This diagram also helps understand and contextualize much of what the government is and should be doing to address the threat of terrorism. Put simply, the government can take actions to alter all three lines depicted in the diagram. The goal is to lower both the actual violence and the sympathizers' accepted level of violence, while raising the population's level of accepted violence. This would narrow the gap between the upper (sympathizers' level) and lower (population's level) bounds to narrow the space where terror can be created, while trying to lower the level of actual violence below this band.

To lower the level of actual violence, the state can target terrorist networks, improve intelligence to stop plots, address some of terrorism's "root causes," protect potential targets, and so on. This is all fairly well known and covers the majority of how most governments spend their resources.

The government can also take measures to lower the sympathizers' level of accepted violence. This can include efforts at delegitimizing their use of violence, which can be done through information operations, working with moderates, and highlighting the disagreements within the supporters as to what constitutes an acceptable amount of violence. For example, the United States is working to "amplify the speeches and writings of prominent Islamic clerics who are renouncing terrorist violence."¹⁶ As specific example, this was done by publicizing Saudi Arabia's highest cleric's speech that warned potential jihadis against joining terrorist groups and by highlighting the former

¹⁶ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Adapts Cold-War Idea to Fight Terrorists," New York Times, March 18, 2008.

leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad's renouncement of violence.¹⁷ Likewise, the U.S. released seized videotapes from al-Qaeda in Iraq that showed them training children for operations.¹⁸

To raise the population's level of accepted violence, the government can take steps to get the population to get used to terrorism. For example, statements like "we live in an era of terrorism,"¹⁹ "there will be more attacks,"²⁰ this is a "long war,"²¹ all serve to persuade the population that more terrorism will occur and that they should be less terrorized by it.

Terrorists, just like the state, also have incentives to try and manipulate these levels of violence and their desired outcomes are the opposite of the state. They want to expand the space where terrorism will occur. This means that they will try to get the population to not get used to terrorism, perhaps by unilaterally taking breaks from terrorism, or by spacing out their attacks with time for the population's level of accepted violence to drop back down in between attacks. This also means that they will try to raise their constituents' levels of accepted violence. They too will wage information campaigns to convince their sympathizers that higher levels of violence are acceptable.²² Of course, they will also try to maximize their level of actual violence to create the highest possible amount of terror.

¹⁷ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Adapts Cold-War Idea to Fight Terrorists," New York Times, March 18, 2008.

¹⁸ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, "U.S. Adapts Cold-War Idea to Fight Terrorists," New York Times, March 18, 2008.

¹⁹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A15004-2004Aug19.html>

²⁰ http://www.newsvine.com/_news/2008/03/06/1347991-bush-us-must-not-let-down-its-guard

²¹ James Carafano, "The Long War Against Terrorism," The Heritage Foundation, September 8, 2003; George Bush 2006 State of the Union Speech.

²² Institute for Defense Analysis report, "Strategic and Operational Perspectives of *al Qaida* and Associated Movements"

In sum, the model presented in this paper is a heuristic device designed to better understand the consequences of terrorist violence and how the rationality of violence changes over time. It is a way to understand how populations socially construct what different levels of violence mean. And it is a way to understand how and why governments can and do manipulate the various levels of actual and accepted violence to make terrorist attacks less terrorizing and so less rational.