

# Is the Use of Terrorism Rational?

Written by Alexandria Reid

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ALEXANDRIA REID, MAY 24 2016

The narrative found in popular media regarding terrorism invariably tends to portray 'terrorists as crazy extremists who commit indiscriminate acts of violence, without any larger goal beyond revenge or a desire to produce fear in an enemy population.' [1] This perception of terrorism has been bolstered by the so called advent of the age of 'new terrorism', characterised by mass casualty suicide attacks conducted by religious fanatics, primarily of Islamic faith, for whom 'lethality is their aim and not their means.' [2] This fundamentally misinterprets terrorism as nihilistic violence that is an end in itself and contributes to the common misperception that terrorism 'exists beyond the realms of rational activity.' [3] Terrorism is rational, however, when correctly understood as a set of tactics employed by rational actors within a wider strategy of coercive political communication, where violence is used in 'the deliberate creation of a sense of fear... to influence the political behaviour of a given target group.' [4]

This instrumental approach to terrorism as a form of 'politics by other means' [5] is the core assumption of the strategic model of terrorism. In the strategic model, terrorism is the product of political utility maximising behaviour in which terrorists 'are motivated by relatively stable and consistent political preferences... evaluate the expected political payoffs of their available options... [and adopt terrorism] when the expected political return is superior to those of alternative options.' [6] This model, drawing heavily on the economic understanding of rationality found in Rational Choice Theory, approaches the rationality of terrorism from a substantive point of view in which the use of terrorism is rational in so far as it is 'appropriate to the achievement of given goals within the limits imposed by given conditions and constraints.' [7] As utility maximisers, 'efficacy is the primary standard by which terrorism is compared with other methods of achieving political goals', thus the model predicates that terrorism *is* successful in practice in order to explain why it is both substantively rational and continues to be instrumentally employed. [8]

The conventional wisdom of the substantive rationality of terrorism and the model itself are directly challenged, however, by a growing body of empirical evidence disproving the instrumental efficacy, and even suggesting the counter-productivity, [9] of the use of terrorism in coercing the desired policy change outlined by the strategic goals of terrorist organisations. [10] Challenges to the consistency of the substantive rationality of terrorism do not demand, however, that the use of terrorism should therefore be considered unconditionally irrational.

Rather, by incorporating the concept of 'procedural rationality', as developed by economist Herbert Simon, the use of terrorism should nonetheless be considered rational since it is the 'outcome of appropriate deliberation'. [11] This social scientific approach draws heavily on psychology rather than economic scholarship, aiming to incorporate the importance of cognitive effects on human decision-making in rational choice, and is concerned not with the consequences of the use of terrorism but the 'process that generated' the decision to strategically employ terrorism as a policy instrument. [12]

An evaluation of the cost-benefit calculations made by terrorist organisations reveals that the decision to use terrorism, whilst generally substantively irrational, is procedurally rational. The logic of the strategic theory behind the deliberation process, and the deliberate nature of the timing, targets and substitution effects of the use of terrorism to maximise the utility of attacks on both tactical and strategic levels, suggests that whilst failing to achieve strategic goals, terrorism is nonetheless the product of a rational cost-benefit analysing thought-process. The use of terrorism is therefore best regarded as often procedurally, though not necessarily substantively, rational.

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Many of the issues regarding the discussion of the rationality of the use of terrorism derive from the semantic confusion surrounding the term 'terrorism'. Carl Schmitt's astute observation, writing in the age of the nation-state, that the 'political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy',<sup>[13]</sup> remains equally insightful today in an era of globalization with the rise of the consensus over non-state terrorism as the new 'international public enemy'.<sup>[14]</sup> Echoing Schmitt, Crelinsten reminds us that the essence of sovereign power is the ability to define what constitutes the 'extra-normal,' and therefore unacceptable and illegitimate, use of political violence.<sup>[15]</sup> In popular discourse, 'terrorism' has become associated almost exclusively with non-state actors, so that the same qualitative use of violence when attributed to the state is labeled differently, revealing the degree of politicization surrounding the term.<sup>[16]</sup> This shared public discourse erroneously conflates the actor with the means, and establishes the 'terrorist threat' as a form of self-evident and objective fact, contributing to a number of conceptual problems when trying to analyse the rationality of the use of terrorism.<sup>[17]</sup>

That the term 'terrorism' has been semantically distorted from an abstract noun into a political pejorative with negative moral connotations precludes an analysis that focuses on the substantive and procedural utility of the use of terrorism as a strategy. It also largely contributes to the complexity of the legal, political and scholarly definitional debate over the term.<sup>[18]</sup> Neumann and Smith rightly suggest that 'an objective appreciation of terrorism as a strategic phenomenon has been undermined largely by mixing up terrorism as a coherent description of a particular tactic—the use of violence to instill fear for political ends—with a moral judgment on the actor's methods and objectives.'<sup>[19]</sup> One of the benefits, therefore, of the approach to rationality found in the strategic model is the reappropriation of 'terrorism' as a value-neutral term. The rationality of the use of terrorism is approached from the traditional Clausewitzian paradigm that places the emphasis on the instrumentality of the 'use of organized armed force primarily to further political goals'.<sup>[20]</sup>

Whilst it seems intuitively somewhat disconcerting to suggest that the use of terrorism is rational precisely because of the value attached to the term, Crenshaw usefully identifies this tension between the rationality and morality is unwarranted since 'to say that the reasoning that leads to the choice of terrorism may be logical is not an argument about moral justifiability'.<sup>[21]</sup> Moreover, a better understanding of the procedural rationality of the use of terrorism through the strategic model may have significantly beneficial ramifications for the improvement of counterterrorism policy.<sup>[22]</sup>

Terrorism, by violating internationally held norms regarding the targeting of civilians in armed conflict, deliberately aims to appear beyond rationalization in order to amplify the psychological effect of an attack. The prevalence of this strategic logic, drawing on well-established traditions of bargaining theory and coercion, can be deduced from both the behaviour and the statements made by terrorist organizations, and vitally contributes to the argument that the use of terrorism is procedurally rational.

The use of violence against seemingly indiscriminately chosen targets aims to provoke chaotic 'disorientation' in which civilians are forced to question the legitimacy of their government's ability to provide security and stability, therefore questioning the very foundations of the social contract.<sup>[23]</sup> At the same time as forcing disorientation, the use of terrorism also intends to simultaneously provoke an advantageous target reaction by goading the target government 'into responding in ways that inadvertently undermine its authority'.<sup>[24]</sup> By encouraging 'overreaction' in the form of 'heavy-handed' and even illegal reprisals, or alternatively, 'power deflation' in which the government appears incapable of dealing with the terrorist threat, the use of terrorism is based on a strategic logic that aims to maximize the 'psychological rather than destructive effects of armed action'.<sup>[25]</sup>

The logic behind attempting to maximize the psychological effect of terrorism is an attempt to compensate for asymmetrical material capabilities. As a non-state actor attempting coerce a far stronger state opponent this represents a rational attempt to maximize limited resource utility. This is the reverse structural condition of most models of coercion, and complements the 'hackneyed but apt' observation that terrorism is the 'weapon of the weak'.<sup>[26]</sup>

Since terrorist organizations generally do not possess the conventional military capabilities that allow the pursuit of a strategy which relies on imposing will 'directly by force of arms', terrorism acts as a form of costly signaling that

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reinforces the credibility and resolve of the terrorist capacity to inflict future punishment through escalation.[27] Kydd and Walter note that it is harder for weaker actors to make credible threats, therefore they 'are forced to display publicly just how far they are willing to go to obtain their desired results.'[28] Target governments are expected to capitulate and concede policy concessions in response to the costs and risks posed by the credibility of the expectation of future damage 'that overwhelm[s] the value of the interests in dispute.'[29]

The strategic principles of disorientation, target response and coercion are noticeably central in the strategic rhetoric of a diverse number of terrorist organisations seeking a variety of different political goals. The attempt to disorientate, coerce and provoke is evident in statements made by the leaders of Hamas and Al-Qaeda, who both seek a combination of social, policy and regime change.[30] Public statements made by leaders such as Abdel Karim Aweis in 2002, linked to Yasir Arafat's Fatah movement, explicitly articulate that the coercive logic of escalation guided the decision to use terrorism 'to increase losses in Israel to a point at which the Israeli public would demand a withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.[31]

The Palestinian use of terrorism, by a multiplicity of groups once loosely coordinated under the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), has become the 'crucial' case for demonstrating the efficacy, and therefore substantive rationality of terrorism.[32] Major achievements in firstly attaining international recognition by the United Nations of the 'inalienable rights of the Palestinian people' just three months after the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked a commercial flight in 1968, and subsequent territorial concessions secured throughout the two sequential Intifada's are seen as key examples within terrorism studies to vindicate the efficacy of the use of terrorism.[33] Palestinian terrorism has become the 'paradigmatic example of terrorism that has worked', and has therefore become a key example with which to explain why 'terrorism of all stripes' is a politically rational strategy.[34]

Max Abrahms has most vociferously questioned the validity of this overall analysis of the substantive rationality of Palestinian terrorism, however. He proposes an alternate explanation that rejects the significance of the use of terrorism in Palestinian political gains. Instead, he identifies endogenous changes within the PLO, including Arafat's decision to officially renounce terrorism and the conciliatory quality of Israeli domestic politics under Yitzhak Rabin, and not the use of terrorism as the causal factors leading to the recognition of Palestinian rights and historical territorial concessions.[35]

Abrahms suggests that whilst process goals, 'intended to sustain the group' including securing financial support, attracting media attention, and boosting membership and morale[36] have been achieved through the use of terrorism, strategically, in terms of 'outcome goals', the failure to secure the consistent political objective of a Palestinian statehood in historic Palestine means that the Palestinian use of terrorism 'can only be described as substantively irrational.'[37]

The Palestinian use terrorism should not, however, be considered procedurally irrational because of this strategic failure, since 'an actor's decision to employ terrorism in pursuit of a given objective is not actually based on its utility but on its *expected* utility.'[38] Regardless of the scholarly empirical investigation into the causal link between the use of terrorism and the realization of organizational goals, 'if leaders perceive that terrorism can be successful relative to other alternatives, then choosing terrorism is rational.'[39] That a variety of terrorist organisations cite other terrorist campaigns, by groups including the Tamil Tigers, al-Qaeda and the PLO, as inspiration for their own actions demonstrates they perceive terrorism to be successful and therefore base their own behaviour on an internally rational expectation of efficacy.[40]

The procedural rationality of the use of terrorism based on observation and experience is further reinforced the utility maximizing nature of the discriminate targeting, substitution and timing behaviours that commonly characterize the use of terrorism. The nature of these considerations have been clearly based on a process of 'appropriate deliberation' that represents a rational cost-benefit calculation in which there has been an *attempt* to maximize utility with regards to consistent political preferences. This further supports that Palestinian use of terrorism, and terrorism more widely, despite its lack of substantive rationality, should therefore be regarded as procedurally rational.[41]

That Palestinian terrorist groups have temporarily launched or discontinued suicide campaigns in accordance with

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major events in the Arab-Israeli peace process, based on the calculation of whether a violent or non-violent strategy promises greater political reward, supports the procedural rationality of the use of terrorism.[42] The 1995 Hamas suicide campaign to coerce the Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, as agreed in the Oslo Accords, was only launched after postponing throughout the spring and summer to allow the PLO time to attempt negotiated peaceful settlement.[43] When in October, Hamas decided upon the cessation of suicide attacks in response to Israel's 'accelerated pace' of withdrawal from the occupied territories, the cessation was openly explained as the product of an analysis of the 'benefit and cost of continued armed operations. If we [Hamas] can fulfill our goals without violence, we will do so' supporting the procedural rationality of the use of terrorism. [44]

This political utility maximizing behaviour that sees terrorism employed intermittently in response to changing strategic environments is not unique to the Palestinian use of terrorism. It is in fact part of a 'clear and recurring pattern' observable in the use of terrorism across the Middle East and Northern Ireland, supporting a general rational understanding of the use of terrorism.[45] Pape notes that if the use of suicide terrorism in particular were irrational then we would expect 'the timing to be either random or, perhaps, event-driven... but little if at all related to the progress of negotiations over issues in dispute that the terrorists want to influence.'[46]

That the targets of Palestinian terrorism have been chosen in accordance with their political goals, and discretely amended in light of escalating costs to the perception of legitimacy of their political agenda, also reflects the procedural rationality of the decision to employ terrorism. The Palestinian decision to only target Israelis from the mid-1970s onwards, a direct product of international backlash following a stream of terrorist hijackings, reflects an important strategic modification that demonstrates procedural rationality, even if these future attacks might be considered substantively irrational for their inefficacy. [47]

Conversely, other terrorist groups are procedurally rational in their conscientious strategic decision to portray deliberate indiscriminate targets. Lutz and Lutz observe that what is 'very rare is the situation in which targets are chosen at random, despite the common misperception that terrorists do not care who or what the targets are.'[48] Civilian targets are chosen precisely because the 'appearance of randomness' is essential to increasing the coercive leverage of the attack by maximising the fear and therefore disorientation produced amongst the target population.[49] The illusion of indiscriminate is essential in order 'to shatter the psychological defenses of those who have escaped the immediate physical consequences of a terrorist attack.'[50] Since the use of terrorism, whilst aimed at the civilian population, demands compliance from a government who are not directly targeted this initial targeting choice is strategically essential to maximize utility.[51]

These behavioural responses to changing strategic environments in order to maximize utility are equally evident in the instrumental logic behind the decision to modify methods of terrorism according to the rising costs of a particular form of action. This is also known as the 'substitution effect.'[52] That the Palestinian use of suicide terrorism is common inside Israel, but 'almost never' occurs in the West Bank or Gaza where other less costly hit-and-run tactics are possible supports the rationality of the cost-benefit use of terrorism.[53] The substitution effect is observable across patterns of international terrorism. Increased airport security in 2002 following 9/11 saw a 13% per quarter reduction in the incidence of airplane hijackings, and a correspondent 10% per quarter rise in other hostage-taking incidents, suggesting the use of terrorism is based on a procedurally rational calculation of the costs and benefits of certain methods.[54]

There is clearly a large and significant body of evidence, both theoretical and case study based, supporting the thesis that the use of terrorism is procedurally rational. The substantive rationality of the use of terrorism is far more contentious and depends largely upon a subjective criterion of what constitutes the successful use of terrorism, however.[55] A survey of the literature reveals that whilst terrorists frequently succeed in achieving process goals that contribute to organisational maintenance, the failure of terrorist organisations to achieve their outcome goals, in the form of their stated political objectives, means that terrorism must be considered a generally substantively irrational enterprise.[56] This would suggest a necessary revision of the dominance of the strategic model within terrorism studies. The incorporation of the concept of procedural rationality, however, provides a powerful tool with which to accommodate for the role of human decision-making within the strategic model. Procedural rationality explains how terrorism is the product of a logical cost-benefit analysis of the *expected* utility of coercive strategies

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within a limited set of options available to non-state political groups, and therefore how the use of terrorism is rational, despite its political inefficacy.

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## Endnotes

[1] Kydd, Walter (2006), p.52

[2] Crenshaw (2007), p.10

[3] Neumann, Smith (2008), p.5

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[5] Clausewitz, (1989) p.7

[6] Abrahms (2008) p.79

[7] Simon (1976), p.130

[8] Crenshaw (2011), p.111

[9] Abrahms (2011), p.589

[10] Jones, Libicki (2008), p.33

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[14] Friedrichs (2006), p.91

[15] Crelinsten (1987), p.8

[16] *ibid*.

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[19] Neumann, Smith (2008), p.13

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[21] Crenshaw (2011), p.112

[22] Abrahms (2011), p.584

[23] *ibid*, p.590

[24] Neumann, Smith (2005), p.578

[25] Neumann, Smith (2008), p.32

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[34] Dershowitz (2002), *in* Abrahms (2004), p.537

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[39] Chenoweth et al (2009), p.181

[40] *ibid*.

[41] Abrahms (2004), p.546

[42] Kydd, Walter (2002), p.282

[43] Pape (2003), p.5

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[44] Mahmud al-Zahar in Pape (2003), p.6

[45] Kydd, Walter (2002), p.264

[46] Pape (2003), p.6

[47] Abrahms (2004), p.545

[48] Lutz, Lutz (2009), p.3

[49] *ibid.*

[50] Neumann, Smith (2005), p.578

[51] Crelisten (1987), p.6

[52] van Um (2009), p.25

[53] Caplan (2006), p.94

[54] Endlers, Sandler (2002) in van Um (2009), p.25

[55] Abrahms (2004), p.537

[56] Abrahms (2008), p.82

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