Transnational Terrorism

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KATHERINE E. BROWN, MAR 28 2022

This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.

The interconnected nature of the global system has brought with it not only unprecedented opportunities and progress in human development, but also greater risks. A shadow side of globalisation gives criminal and violent groups the ability to spread their message and widen their operations. The impact of this alters not only the organisation, resources and methods of such groups but also their reasoning and motivations. Under these conditions we have seen the proliferation of terrorist groups with agendas and operations that go beyond the states where those groups originated and principally operate. International Relations concerns itself with transnational terrorism as it poses risks, and questions, that are not easily addressed through domestic (or disconnected) law and order solutions. In recent decades, transnational terrorism has also generated some heated debates, both in scholarship and in public and political spheres, due to 9/11 and the subsequent US-led War on Terror. It remains one of the foremost global issues in our world.

Much as transnational corporations originate in one place and develop operations that span the local and the international, those terrorist groups with goals, activities and organisational forms that reach beyond their point of origin can also be referred to as 'transnational'. This draws an important distinction from non-transnational terrorist groups such as the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain whose goals, membership and activities are focused on state politics, even if they receive international support. While defining transnational terrorism is therefore relatively straightforward as it denotes when the issue is one for International Relations' concern, defining terrorism itself is the subject of much debate.

Terrorism and terrorists can be transnational in three ways: through their goals, their actions and their organisational form – each of which exposes the dark side of globalisation. Furthermore, while examples of transnational terrorism since 2001 may appear to be mostly religiously inspired, one cannot conclude that there is anything inevitable about this, or that Islam specifically is the significant factor.

Perhaps no transnational terrorist group has gained as much attention and notoriety for its activities as Islamic State (also referred to as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh). While it was al-Qaeda that brought transnational terrorism to the centre of international relations following their 9/11 attacks, it was Islamic State that came to dominate attention over the longer term due to their desire to create a 'caliphate' (an Islamic empire) and more importantly their short-lived success in doing so. This is where their name originates, via their intention to annex territory and self-declare statehood. Capitalising on the chaos of the Syrian Civil War and ongoing instability in Iraq post-2011, Islamic State took control of large areas of territory. At one point it held approximately 30 per cent of Syria and 40 per cent of Iraq. By 2018, coordinated international action had pushed them out of most of this territory.

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Below is a collection of multimedia and textual resources that help unpack, and explain, the importance of terrorism within International Relations.

Transnational Terrorism
Written by Katherine E. Brown

General Overviews

Fighting Terror – Podcast series

Talking Terror – Podcast series

PBS Frontline – documentary collection on terrorism

Global Terrorism Database – Website resource

Defining terrorism – Coursera free lecture

Religion, War and Terrorism – online lecture

International Centre for Counterterrorism – website

Islamic State and Affiliated Groups

The ISIS files – website resource

Incels

Far right extremism

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