



NEXTGEN 5.0

What Are the Links between Democracy & Terrorism?

Charles Fidler

ABOUT US

NextGen 5.0 is a pioneering non-profit, independent, and virtual think tank committed to inspiring and empowering the next generation of peace and security leaders in order to build a more secure and prosperous world.

COPYRIGHT

This material is offered free of charge for personal and non-commercial use, provided the source is acknowledged. For commercial or any other use, prior written permission must be obtained from the NextGen 5.0. In no case may this material be altered, sold or rented.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation.

INTRODUCTION

The relationships between governments and societies that live inside and outside the territorial boundaries of the state have led to speculation about the connection between the state and violent non-state actors. While terrorism affected democratic states largely before the events of 2001, the attacks perpetrated by al-Qaeda against the West in the 21st century has led to an increasing interest in understanding the links between democratic regimes and terrorism. While it is not within the essay's scope to discuss the intricacies of definitional arguments, consensus between different actors on the definition of democracy and terrorism has been sporadic.¹ The multitude of aspects that are implicit to any definition of these terms has led those who study such intricacies to agree only on potential characteristics without an empirically agreed definition. Without an explicit definition of these two terms, academics and policymakers are sure to have conflicting research, analysis, and predication on any notion of democracy and terrorism. This paper defines terrorism as “the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence, or the threat of violence, in the pursuit of political change”.² For the purpose of this paper, democracy is not linear, but includes characteristics such as “elections, rule of law, separation of powers, pluralism, and various civic and political freedoms”.³ This paper seeks to address these links by unwrapping some of the important research that has been conducted in relation to democracy and terrorism. This research concludes that stable democracies see less violence than autocracies, but transitioning democracies or those democracies pursuing aggressive foreign policies will see more terrorism. Terrorism is a violent political action that is dependent both on the actual institutional structures of states as well as the societal grievances that accompany an environment where terrorism is a viable political option.

¹ Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside terrorism*. 3rd ed., Columbia University Press, 2006. 20-34.

² Ibid. 40.

³ Tilly, Charles. *Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 1-24.

CURRENT DATA TRENDS

A large amount of literature on terrorism challenges the assumption that democratic regimes are generally less likely to experience terrorism by provide peaceful outlets for disagreement between societal members within the state.⁴ A study conducted by Eubank and Leonard largely rejects this assumption and concludes that terrorist groups are much more likely to operate in democratic states rather than states with autocratic regimes. It is argued that this is due to civic and political liberties that constrain liberal democracies.⁵

Methodological concerns have been brought up regarding the Eubank and Weinberg study, specifically concerning usage of group-specific data and not incidence data. Furthermore, oppressive regimes may publicize terror attacks less, which would indefinitely skew data.⁶ Eyerman, using data sets from International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE), found slightly conflicting data. While democracies had fewer years of no terrorism, Eyerman found that democratic regimes experienced more terrorist events during certain period, with transitory democracies experiencing more terrorist attacks and established democracies receiving less.⁷ Li, also using the ITERATE database, claimed the links between democracies and transnational terrorism are much more complicated than previously asserted by other literature. While democratic participation reduces transnational terrorism, “institutional constraints” of democracies are positively correlated with terrorism. Furthermore, Li’s findings suggest that democratic regimes that used proportional representation were less likely to see terrorist incidents in their country while mixed and majoritarian systems were likely to see more than undemocratic

⁴ Ganor, Boaz. *Global alert: the rationality of modern Islamist terrorism and the challenge to the liberal democratic world*. Columbia University Press, 2015. 78-79.

⁵ Eubank, William Lee, and Leonard Weinberg. “Does democracy encourage terrorism?” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1994. 429.

⁶ Sandler, Todd. “On the relationship between democracy and terrorism.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1995. 1–7.

⁷ Eyerman, Joe..” *International Interactions*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998. 156–160.

regimes.⁸ Li's findings are furthered by Chenoweth who, using the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and using Goldstone's regime classification types, found that partial democracies with factionalism had the highest number of terror attacks from 1983 to 1998 and 2007-2010, and in 2000 to 2010 countries that were under foreign occupation also saw increase in terrorist related events.⁹ Figure 1 shows important data regarding the links between democracy and terrorism.

Figure 1

Authors	Research Data Set	Findings	Data Problems
Eubank and Weinberg (1994) Sandier (1995) [Data Problems]	*World Directory of Terrorist and Other Organizations Associated with Guerrilla Warfare, Political Violence and Protest *Democracy: A Worldwide Survey	* (+) Democracies * (+) Civil and political rights * (+) Number of political parties * (+) Party dispersion is correlated with terrorist groups * (+) Economic discrimination * (+) Social mobilization	* Underreporting terrorist activities in authoritarian regimes * Group driven data * Hard to replicate * Definitional issues * Change in base of operation. * Data that was captured at different points in time. * Different variables affecting other variables.
Eyerman (1998)	ITERATE (1968-1977 and 1978-1986)	* (-) Established Democracies * (+) New/Transitioning Democracies * (+/-) Non-Democracies (See less than new, but more than established) * (-) Extraction Compacity * (+) GDP * (+) Population	* Focus on Transnational Data * Event specific data. * Reporting bias * Structure of Data: Spill overs data eliminated. * Definitional issues
Li (2005)	ITERATE (1975-1997)	* (-) Greater democratic participation. * (+) Intuitional constrains * (-) Economic Development * (+) Regime Change * (+) Capable Governments * (+) History of Terrorist Violence * Civil and Political Limitations does not reduce terrorist violence.	* Focuses on transnational data. * Definitional issues * Voter turnout higher in repressive regimes. * Voting habits in different regimes. * Reporting Bias
Walsh and Piazza (2010)	*ITERATE (1981-2003) *RAND-MIPT (1998-2004)	* (-) Physical Integrity Rights [T/D] * (+) Durability [T/D] * (NA) Participation * (NA) Executive Constrain * (+) Civil War [T/D] * (+) Population [D] * (+) GDP per capita [T]	* Uses open source data * Definitional issues * Reporting bias

Figure 1 shows the basic research data sets, findings, and potential data problems of four authors included in the sources. Findings: (+) shows positive correlation to terrorism; (-) negative correlation to terrorism; (NA) not significant. [D] stands for Domestic Terrorism and [T] stands for Transnational Terrorism.

⁸ Li, Quan. "Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2005. 287-291.

⁹ Chenoweth, Erica. "Terrorism and Democracy." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, Nov. 2013. 358-359.

WHY MIGHT DEMOCRACIES SEE MORE TERRORISM

A structural argument claims that democratic regimes with extensive civil liberties are more prone to terrorism because they lower the associated cost of operation for a terrorist group. Schmidt in his article *Terrorism and Democracy* characterizes democracy as a system that is “ruled by the majority while respecting the right of the minority,” while terrorism “is an instrument of rule of a tyrannic minority whether in or out of power.” Through this contradiction, Schmidt claims that democracies are at a “tactical disadvantage” against violent groups such as terrorists because terrorism possess an “acceptability and effectiveness” in which the government has to choose between effective counter-terrorist policies or preserving “civil” or “political liberties.”¹⁰ According to the Rational Choice Theory, when the costs and risks that terror organizations use to operate are low, terrorism will be more likely to occur.¹¹ In a liberal democracy, freedom of movement, freedom of association, freedom of the press, the number of targets, legal constraints, and negative externalities that are associated with the rise of economic liberalism have become critical components of democratic societies that lower the cost for terrorists to operate. Institutional constraints prohibit the state from implementing draconian counter-terrorism strategies that might be otherwise implemented in undemocratic regimes without the total loss of regime legitimacy by the polity.¹² Pape claims that democracies are more vulnerable to terrorism because the polity within a democratic country is more sensitive to violence and is easily manipulated by violent organizations, especially when considering suicide terrorism tactics.¹³ While not specifically mentioned in Pape, democratic “sensitivities”

¹⁰ Schmid, Alex P. “Terrorism and democracy.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1992. 14–15.

¹¹ Crenshaw, Martha. “The Causes of Terrorism.” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1981. 385.

¹² Chenoweth, Erica. “Terrorism and Democracy.” *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, Nov. 2013. 361.

¹³ Pape, Robert A. “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 97, no. 3, Nov. 2003. 344.

could come from the media exposure that is granted to terrorist organizations. Since terrorist organizations essentially want to “maximize publicity” in order to intimidate or coerce its target audience, liberal democracies with extensive press freedom could be beneficial to terrorist groups. For example, the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 by Hezbollah in 1985 and the finding that almost 80 percent of Americans who planned to travel abroad found overseas travel too dangerous after the hijacking supports Pape’s theory.¹⁴

Unfortunately, Reiter and Wade found that there was almost no difference between regime types and suicide terrorism when they aggregated more data and used a more methodical analysis, largely putting Pape’s hypothesis in doubt.¹⁵ Likewise, if Pape’s argument was sustainable we might see terrorists generally being more successful. Further research has concluded that only three out of 42 terrorist groups were “successful,” a seven percent success rate. This is primarily because terrorism “miscommunicates” political goals and gives the impression that terrorists want to destroy “societies” and “publics,” thereby eroding the prospect of the target state making concessions.¹⁶ Concurrently, domestic terrorist groups may find the media counterproductive to their cause. While potentially trying to lure the democratic regime into repressive actions that would delegitimize the state, in stable democracies where political institutions are perceived as legitimate, actors such as terrorists that operate outside the means of normal political communication may lose support, become deprived of manpower and resources, and cease to exist.¹⁷ However, in democratic institutions that are not perceived as legitimate, terrorist or violent non-state actors could find ample maneuverability and

¹⁴ Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside terrorism*. 3rd ed., Columbia University Press, 2006. 190.

¹⁵ Wade, Sara Jackson, and Dan Reiter. “Does Democracy Matter?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2007. 345.

¹⁶ Abrahms, Max. “Why Terrorism Does Not Work.” *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2006. 51-56.

¹⁷ Crenshaw, Martha. “How terrorism declines.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1991, pp. 80; Cronin, Audrey Kurth. “How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups.” *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2006. 2-3.

sympathy within at least a minority of the population.¹⁸ Using McCarthy and Zald's resource mobilization approach, it is possible to stipulate that democracies allow for easier social mobilization and resource accumulation through liberal democratic values that could potentially create groups that resort to terrorism.¹⁹ Furthermore, democratic social mobilization could allow the population to sympathize and legitimize terrorist groups. For example, Hezbollah, a Lebanese terrorist organization, has continued to participate in Lebanese democratic political processes since 1992 despite advocating for a "radical Shi'ite Islamic caliphate dominated by Islamic law." During this time, its political weight in the Lebanese government has grown without the organizing disavowing terrorism actions.²⁰

If terrorist groups are trying to amplify their voices using media to be on a "level playing field" with the state, then it might be possible that terrorist incidents happen in countries where social mobilization and protests frequently occur. Baker et al. found a positive significance between nonviolent protests and terrorist events and retorted that protests exacerbate the perceived weakness of the state and condition protest actors to "outbid" others to gain support, possibly leading to violence. Concurrently, the authors found that state coercion increases the perception of a strong state and reduced terrorism.²¹ The strength of this argument potentially shows why some countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States are attacked more often than countries with less social mobilization such as the Nordic countries and Japan.²² Furthermore, it could be argued that transitioning

¹⁸ Huntington, Samuel. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New ed., Yale University Press, 2006. 1-5.

¹⁹ McCarthy, John D., and Mayer N. Zald. "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 6, May 1977. 1214-1217.

²⁰ Ganor, Boaz. *Global alert: the rationality of modern Islamist terrorism and the challenge to the liberal democratic world*. Columbia University Press, 2015. 74-78.

²¹ Baker, Ryan, et al. "How Much Terror? Dissidents, Governments, Institutions and the Cross-National Study of Terror Attacks." *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 53, 2016. 713-722.

²² Chenoweth, Erica. "Terrorism and Democracy." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, Nov. 2013. 357.

democracies accrue more violence because “social mobilization” and “political consciousness” are increasing faster than “effective” and “legitimate” political institutions, creating “political decay” and terrorism.²³ Critics of this argument claim that it “overpredicts” terrorism because both democratic and autocratic countries with social mobilization do not always see terrorism. Further research is needed to see how social and political mobilization increases or decreases the likelihood of terrorism in societies.²⁴

CHALLENGES TO THE POSITIVE LINK BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND TERRORISM

The rational model has been used to challenge the theory that democracies will see more terrorism. Using what Eyerman calls the “political access school” of thought, democracies are less likely to see terrorism because the cost of turning to terrorism in a democratic state is higher than the benefits.²⁵ Democracies generally have “conflict-reducing mechanisms” built into their internal institutions that, if working properly, allow for a degree of legitimacy by the general population. Furthermore, any violent action may accrue backlash on the terrorist organization, even if a segment of the population sympathizes with the terrorist cause due to the unconventional nature of the violent political action.²⁶

It is possible that both approaches are correct in their own right: democracies may not be the target of terrorism necessarily because of the liberal democratic principles, but their liberal principles could inhibit counter-terrorism policies when terrorism already exists, during democratic transitional periods, or when democratic regimes pursue

²³ Huntington, Samuel. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New ed., Yale University Press, 2006. 5.

²⁴ Chenoweth, Erica. “Terrorism and Democracy.” *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, Nov. 2013. 368.

²⁵ Eyerman, Joe. “International Interactions,” vol. 24, no. 2, 1998. 152.

²⁶ Schmid, Alex P. “Terrorism and democracy.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1992. 17.

aggressive foreign policies.²⁷ Walsh and Piazza, using ITERATE and the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (RAND-MIRP), found that a democratic institution's respect for "physical integrity rights" and human rights are negatively correlated with terrorism. Their work, despite using open source materials which are potentially susceptible to flaws, may be more valid due to their using both transnational and domestic terrorist incidents.²⁸ Unlike transnational terrorist groups, domestic terrorist groups may be more influenced to strike the government when physical rights are limited. This could be why Li, using transnational data, found that the links between transnational terrorism and human rights were "spurious" while Walsh and Piazza, using both domestic and transnational data, found a negative correlation.²⁹ Kurrild-Klitgaard, et al. delve deeper into this topic and found that transnational terrorism within the origin country of a democracy is strongly negative, while also finding that political freedom in a country is non-linear. The authors suggest that violence in democracies, particularly in the West, have little to do with respect to civil or human rights, but potentially on political freedoms. They also conclude that transitioning democracies and "half-democracies" may create perceived political grievances that are uncontrollable by the new regime.³⁰

Government policies are crucial to understanding the links between democracy and terrorism. Research done by Koch and Cranmer found that left wing governments saw more incidences of terrorism than did right wing governments. Because left wing governments are attributed to "dove-like" domestic welfare policies and right-wing parties are associated with "hawkish" internationalist policies, terrorist organizations believe that left wing governments will be weaker in their

²⁷ Eyerman, Joe." *International Interactions*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998. 165; Blomberg, S. Brock, and B. Peter Rosendorff. "A Gravity Model of Globalization, Democracy and Transnational Terrorism." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, Nov. 2006. 15.

²⁸ Walsh, James I., and James A. Piazza. "Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism." *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 43, no. 5, 2010. 571.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 554-571.

³⁰ Kurrild-Klitgaard, Peter, et al. "The political economy of freedom, democracy and transnational terrorism." *Public Choice*, vol. 128, no. 1-2, 2006. 307-309.

response to terrorism, possibly giving validity to the civic liberty argument above that democracies see more terrorism.³¹ Denzell rejects this claim and concludes that right wing parties tend to restrict access to the government, inhibit freedom, and push “working-class groups” from power. Finding that institutions are precluding them from political power, left-wing actors will make a cost-benefit analysis and decide whether terrorism is worth the cost. Similarly, other authors have found that more inclusive political structures, such as regimes that employ proportional representation and a high degree of judicial independence, see less terrorist violence than those democracies that are more exclusive, such as a majoritarian electoral system.³² Unfortunately, Aksoy, one of the leading proponents of this theory, only uses countries in Western Europe to support her thesis³³ and research done by Foster et al. that studied a much larger data range from GTD found that more “inclusive institutions” increase “fractionalization and gridlock” in the electorate. With decreased “political clout,” small minority parties have little power and revert to terrorism.³⁴

However, Suvan and Phillips conclude in their research that the political structure of a democratic state has less to do with terrorism and more to do with their “foreign policy behavior.” They suggest that democracies are largely the target of transnational terrorist organizations and find the correlation between regime type and domestic terrorism is not statistically significant.³⁵ Potentially consistent with Suvan and Phillips, Blomberg and Rosendorff found a negative relationship between terrorist incidences in transnational

³¹ Koch, Michael T, and Skyler Cranmer. “Testing the “Dick Cheney” Hypothesis: Do Governments of the Left Attract More Terrorism than Governments of the Right?” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 24, 2007. 323.

³² Aksoy, Deniz. “Elections and the Timing of Terrorist Attacks.” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 76, no. 4, 2012.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Foster, Dennis M., et al. “There Can Be No Compromise: Institutional Inclusiveness, Fractionalization and Domestic Terrorism.” *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 43, 10 Oct. 2012. 555.

³⁵ Savun, Burcu, and Brian Phillips. “Democracy, Foreign Policy, and Terrorism.” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 53, no. 6, Dec. 2009. 896.

source country terrorism and a positive correlation between transnational host country terrorism when the host country pursues aggressive foreign policies.³⁶ This may explain why the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom have more incidents of terrorism while other democracies experience very little.

CONCLUSION

What is and what is not a democracy or a terrorist group has led to difficulty in establishing linkages between them. Furthermore, difficulties in finding data and large differences in methodological techniques lead to significantly different outcomes when analyzing data from notoriously covert groups. Despite the general consensus that transitioning democracies see more terrorist incidents within their country, it should be a priority for researchers and policymakers to continue studying multiple disciplines in order to properly codify distinct linkages from data. Furthermore, finding these linkages is especially important for policy makers to effectively create legitimate and conscientious counterterrorism strategies. Continued data that is lackadaisical in understanding the differences between transnational and domestic terrorism will continue to lead democratic policies astray. It could be argued that transitioning democracies and regimes that saw terrorism before they were democracies experience more terrorist incidences than non-democracies. Additionally, established democracies that have aggressive foreign policies may also experience more terrorism. When these terrorist groups are already within the democratic country or regimes act as host countries for terrorism, democracies may be institutionally constrained in destroying the targeted terrorist groups, especially if those groups are dispersed in diaspora communities.³⁷ Further research needs to be done on diaspora communities, their ties to terrorism source countries, and the tactical and strategic differences that arise between domestic and transnational terrorism and how this effects counterterrorism policies.

³⁶ Blomberg, S. Brock, and B. Peter Rosendorff. "A Gravity Model of Globalization, Democracy and Transnational Terrorism." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, Nov. 2006. 21-22.

³⁷ Hoffman, Bruce, et al. "The Radicalization of Diasporas and Terrorism." *RAND National Security Research Division*, 2007. vii-xi.

ABOUT US

We are a non-profit virtual think tank committed to inspiring and empowering the next generation of global leaders in order to build a more secure and prosperous world.

FOLLOW US

Facebook: [@NextGen50ThinkTank](#)

Twitter: [@NextGen_50](#)

Linkedin: [@next-gen50](#)

Instagram: [@nextgen_50](#)