



Killing Civilians or Holding Territory? How to Think about Terrorism

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How should we conceptualize terrorism? Is it a tactic that can be utilized by any actor? Or is it a tactic that defines a class of actors? Or is it both? How do we relate the concept of a terrorist act to the concept of a terrorist organization? Debates over how best to define terrorism have chased the elusive goal of finding *the* correct definition. And the key lesson that has emerged from this endeavor is that we will not ever find a single, correct definition. Instead, our collective goal should be to find a *useful* operationalizable definition that can help us to understand the world better and act in accordance with what we understand.

We strive to go beyond simply arguing about definitions and examine how the way we define terrorism impacts the research we do. In the end, different operationalizations in quantitative work have an important, sometimes crucial, impact on what we find when we test hypotheses about the use of different kinds of political violence. Importantly, classifying and theorizing also guide us toward measurement and modeling. For decades, the study of terrorism was characterized by a lack of agreement on definitional issues and proceeded using primarily case methods, focusing on a few, such as Israel or Northern Ireland, and received little attention from the larger scholarly community. Due to the events of September 11 and their impact on the United States and subsequently on countries around the world, scholars across disciplines are drawn to the study of this form of political violence and are increasingly using cross-national databases to investigate the causes and consequences of terrorism. Departing from the decades-long debate on definitions, we focus on areas that have been neglected, but are consequential in recent scholarship.

Many scholars of political violence conceptualize terrorism as an act of violence and measure each incident accordingly (an *action*-based approach). When

they model reasons for the frequency of this type of violence (or consequences of terrorism), they often count events and compare across countries and over time. Researchers who study terrorist organizations would often adopt this event-based approach to define a terrorist organization—a group that conducted terrorist attacks.

In contrast, a recent alternative suggests conceptualizing violence based upon whether the insurgent group controls territory within the state borders or not (an *actor*-based approach focusing on the issue of territorial control or lack thereof). For actor-based scholars, terrorism is the type of violence produced by insurgents without a territorial base. For these scholars, violence by groups that do not hold territory is not considered terrorism. This forum debates the issue with arguments from each side.

Dugan and LaFree, co-creators of the largest open-source, action-based terrorism database (The Global Terrorism Database or GTD), provide an outline of the GTD's additive value to the study of terrorism. In addition to outlining how to build an *action-based* database, they discuss some of the complications of creating such a database and offer some research achievements that are based on using the GTD.

De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca offer an alternative way to consider how to think about terrorism using an actor-based approach. Although an action-based approach to terrorism is sensible, its main problem, they contend, is how to distinguish it from other types of warfare. Instead, an approach based on the control of territory that insurgents hold offers a clear measurement strategy: If rebels do not control territory, they will be forced to rely on terrorism. After outlining the implications of moving from an action- to actor-based approach, De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca provide a research agenda and suggestions for progress in this approach.

Victor Asal provides a case-based response to the actor-based territorial approach as outlined by De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca. Avoiding well-traveled cases of terrorism, such as Northern Ireland or Al-Qaeda, Asal uses the De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca classification schema for sorting out cases that are less cited by conflict scholars. Asal argues that this outcome is a strong refutation of the actor-based approach.

In the last section, Findley and Young use geography to compare action- and actor-based approaches to terrorism. They geo-locate terrorist events from the Global Terrorism Database and zones of rebel control from the ViewConflicts software. By investigating this overlap in two cases, Peru and India, they show the implications for the actor- and action-based approaches of terrorism. Findley and Young conclude that there are costs associated with each: action-based approaches can lead to *overcounting* of terrorist events, but that the actor-based approach leads to significant *undercounting* of terrorist events and exclusion of highly relevant events.

Measuring Terrorist Attacks with Open-Source Data

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Until recently, empirical studies of terrorism were based mostly on cases studies, making it difficult to systematically measure terrorism from either an actor- or

event-based approach. Decades ago, Schmid and Jongman (1988:177) characterized terrorism research as “impressionistic, superficial, and at the same time often also pretentious, venturing far-reaching generalizations on the basis of episodic evidence.” More recently, Lum, Kennedy, and Sherley (2006:492) report that between 1975 and 2002, 96% of all the terrorism-related articles in peer-reviewed journals were characterized as “thought pieces,” lacking any systematic empirical analyses. Despite the demand for high-quality empirical and generalizable research on terrorism, without data that objectively document information on all terrorist activities, a few high-profile attacks likely distort our perceptions of terrorism.

Contemporary efforts to build event databases can be traced back to the late 1960s and are closely related to the introduction of satellite technology and portable video equipment, technology that made it possible to send instantaneously images of conflict and violence from any one place on the planet to any other place. Thus far, the most comprehensive event databases have been those produced by RAND, ITERATE, GTD, and WITS.

In 1968, the RAND Chronology began collecting information on international terrorist attacks. The decision by RAND to exclude from the Chronology those acts of terrorism by perpetrators against fellow citizens in their own country was influenced by two main considerations. First, the Chronology was initially contracted to answer a directive by the US government to provide data in order to better understand the perceived growing threat of terrorist attacks on US interests abroad. This threat was viewed as categorically different from violence and conflict within a country (Dugan, LaFree, Cragin and Kasupski 2008). A second consideration, also relevant to most other open-source collection efforts at the time, was that domestic attacks were so much more numerous than international and that far more resources would be required to collect them (Dugan et al. 2008). In fact, another major data collection effort that began at about the same time, International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE), restricted its collection to only international events for this reason.¹ Thus, since the beginning of event-based collection of terrorist attacks, efforts were action-based, rather than actor-based.

These early data collection efforts demonstrate the tremendous challenges facing the task of collecting comprehensive information on the entire universe of terrorist attacks (even when they were restricted to international attacks). Inevitably, some events were likely only reported in local newspapers that were difficult to access and were not archived. Further complicating things, despite multilingual staffs, news items could easily have been reported in languages not understood by any of the analysts on the collection teams, although they relied on international media collections, such as Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). Despite the challenges of these efforts, open-source media reports offered an important new venue for collecting the universe of terrorist incidents. Unlike perpetrators of other illegal acts, with some exceptions, terrorists want their actions to receive widespread attention. Terrorism is meant to heighten alarm, and this can only happen if the media publicizes the attacks. In fact, as early as 1975, Jenkins (p. 4) declared that, “terrorism is theatre” and explained how terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the media and the international press. Thus, in the case of terrorism, media reports hold out the possibility of producing a more comprehensive chronology

¹While the ITERATE database is a collection of events carried out by autonomous nonstate actors, the developers of ITERATE refer to that kind of terrorism as transnational when foreign nationalities are involved either through the perpetrator, target, or its ramifications. The developers reserve the term “international” for cases where the perpetrator was under the control of a sovereign state (Mickolus, Sandler, Murdock, and Fleming 2004).

of events than would be possible through alternative strategies, such as collecting official reports or interviewing victims—the two primary sources of crime data in the United States (LaFree and Dugan 2009).

In general, the most useful data set on terrorism for researchers is one that broadly defines terrorism but then allows researchers to vet their own cases through a set of relevant filters. The definition used in the original Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which was based on that of the US military, provides just such a broad definition: “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation.” (LaFree and Dugan 2007:184) Note that the GTD avoids restricting the targets to only civilians, although attacks must be illegal, precluding attacks against on-duty military personnel. Further, motivations extend beyond political to include economic, religious, and social goals. While some may argue that all of these are inherently political (Young and Dugan 2011), by explicitly including these motives in the definition it is more likely that they are unambiguously included.

The GTD departs from the other terrorist event databases because its collection includes both international and domestic attacks from 1970 through 2010 and continues collection on an ongoing basis. ITERATE has never collected domestic attacks; RAND only began its domestic collection in 1998 through the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT), and the National Counterterrorism Center’s database, Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS), only began to fully collect terrorist attacks in 2005 and stopped collecting data in April 2012.

The Broad-Based Approach of the GTD

With these recent developments, the GTD is the only terrorism incident database that is freely available to scholars with an easy-to-use rectangular format that allows cases to be filtered to meet specific criteria or aggregated to higher-level units such as geographic area, perpetrator, or type of attack. While the GTD is clearly useful for any action-based research strategy, because its cases can be aggregated to the perpetrator, researchers could and have also used the GTD for actor-based research (Dugan 2011; LaFree, Yang, and Crenshaw 2010). However, because it does not include information on group-based characteristics, the GTD can only contribute to actor-based research if supplemented with additional sources.

An advantage that the GTD has over other terrorist incident databases is that it was developed and is maintained by a university research center—not a government agency—allowing decisions about the database to be made without organized political pressure. While these characteristics make the GTD a valuable source of information on worldwide terrorism, perhaps its most important characteristic is that it includes data on both international and domestic attacks across the globe for more than four decades [see LaFree and Dugan (2007, 2009) for a full description of how the GTD is collected]. This contrasts directly with ITERATE, which excludes all domestic attacks, often causing a disjoint between the theory motivating the research and its analysis. For example, in Li’s (2005) assessment of the effects of different components of democracy on transnational terrorism, he argues that members of democratic societies are better able to pursue nonviolent alternatives, suggesting that they are less likely to pursue *domestic* terrorism. Yet, because he used ITERATE, he could only test his ideas using *transnational* terrorism. Had he used the GTD, domestic attacks could have been part of the dependent variable and thus more closely tied to his motivating theory. In fact, Young and Dugan (2011) later use the GTD to test a similar theory using, among other dependent variables, known domestic attacks.

In 2005, we began collecting new data for GTD using a set of criteria recommended by a GTD Advisory Board: (START, 2009:4–5). While the criteria can be read in full in the materials on the GTD Web site (<http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>), it is important to note that three of them are mandatory; the act must be: (i) intentional, (ii) violent, and (iii) committed by subnational perpetrators. In addition, at least two of the following criteria must be met: (i) political, economic, religious, or social goal, (ii) intention to convey a message to a broader audience, and (iii) occurrence outside the context of legitimate warfare. The key strength of these criteria is that users can filter cases based on the definition dictated by their research questions rather than adjusting their research question to match the data. Further, the GTD also includes flags that identify cases that are too ambiguous to be classified as terrorism with certainty, thus allowing scholars to exclude ambiguous cases (labeled “Doubt Terrorism Proper”). Alternative designations for cases such as these include insurgency, nonterrorist crime, genocide, and internecine conflict. This flag allows the GTD to be flexible enough to include suspected cases, while allowing researchers to filter out those cases depending on their definition of terrorism and their research design.

The structure of the GTD also allows researchers to analyze data based on specific characteristics of attacks (that is, action-based research). For example, Dugan, LaFree, and Piquero (2005) examine the subset of aerial hijacking cases to assess the effectiveness of several actions that were intended to reduce this form of terrorist attack. By combining the GTD with data from the Federal Aviation Administration (for nonterrorist hijackings), they were able to show that after the implementation of metal detectors the risk of continued hijackings dropped substantially. Other studies have filtered cases by country of attack (LaFree, Dugan, and Korte 2009; Greenbaum, Dugan, and LaFree 2007); by perpetrators (LaFree, Dugan, Xie, and Singh 2011; LaFree, Yang, and Crenshaw 2009; Dugan, Huang, LaFree, and McCauley 2008); and by consequence (LaFree, Dugan, and Franke 2005). Research by Enders, Sandler, and Gaibulleov (2011) uses only the attacks in the GTD that meet all three criteria listed above, excluding cases marked as “Doubt Terrorism Proper,” narrowing the cases to those that fit a more restricted definition.

Despite the value gained from relying on media reports to develop databases on terrorist activity, several biases inherent to media threaten the validity of databases like the GTD. Perhaps most importantly, media penetration is far from ubiquitous, and it has varied dramatically over time. For example, prior to 1991, reports of terrorist attacks in Soviet territories from the GTD were relatively rare, totaling 44 attacks, with 36 of them perpetrated in 1990. From 1991 to 2008, the GTD records nearly 1,500 attacks in the former Soviet states, increasing the average number of attacks per year from two to eighty. While this disparity might portray the true pattern of terrorism over time in that region, it is more likely that the numbers reflect in part the collapse of the highly autocratic Soviet regime and the resulting declines in restrictions on media reporting. Similarly, it is unlikely that only one terrorist attack was perpetrated in North Korea over the forty years since 1970 (in 1994 according to the GTD). Instead, such governments are likely more effective than other regimes in controlling the material that is reported through media, suppressing information that could undermine the legitimacy of the state (Drakos and Gofas 2006a). Given this concern, scholars have offered some methodological suggestions for mitigating the impact of this difference between reporting across countries with varying levels of free press (Drakos and Gofas 2006a; 2006b; Young and Dugan 2011).

Furthermore, because the purpose of news agencies in free market economies is to report timely information to the public as opposed to supplying valid data to researchers, information on terrorist attacks is often restricted to what was

known during or shortly after the attack. Even the number of fatalities may be unknown at first. For lower-profile events especially, misreported information may never be corrected. Further, unsuccessful attacks that are not reported by the media are unlikely to make it into the GTD. The difficulty of relying on the media to provide valid accounts of events becomes especially apparent when different news sources report different details about the same attack.

A related disadvantage of the original GTD is that it did not distinguish international from domestic attacks. In order to identify international attacks, the location of the attack must be known, the nationality of the target or victim must be known, and the nationality of the perpetrator must be known. While nearly all of the cases in the GTD list the countries of the attacks and the nationalities of the targets/victims, relatively few cases list the nationality of perpetrators. Young and Dugan (2011) use this information to classify attacks as domestic, international, or ambiguous. Enders et al. (2011) approximate the number of international and domestic attacks for each country over the series by adjusting the figures based on known ITERATE international attacks. While their exercise might be useful, its validity is based on the relative compatibility of the GTD and ITERATE and on distributional assumptions related to domestic and international attacks. Efforts are currently underway to include four new variables in the GTD that will help determine whether the case is international, domestic, or unknown (following a variation of Young and Dugan's strategy). The staff is assessing the validity of approximating the perpetrator's nationality with the modal country where that perpetrator attacked. Perpetrators with modal countries that account for less than 50% of the cases will be examined individually. Once those are identified, three variables will indicate whether (i) the target/victim's nationality matches the country of the attack, (ii) the target/victim's nationality matches the perpetrator's nationality, and (iii) the perpetrator's nationality matches the country of attack. If all three show a match, then the GTD will show that attack as domestic. If any of these three do not match, then the case will be marked as international. If any of these three are unknown, then the case will be marked as unknown. We anticipate that these variables will allow users to classify cases into "known domestic," "known international," and "ambiguous cases". By knowing the exact reason the case is ambiguous (for example, 1, 2, or 3 are unknown), researchers can decide for themselves how they want to classify the cases. Keeping with the past practice of the GTD, researchers will have options in terms of the decision of how to define international and domestic based on their decisions for these four variables.

Conclusion

In sum, event terrorism databases like the GTD are most valuable for supporting action-based research, although they can be used to support actor-based projects. Regardless of the research, scholars should be aware of limits of these data. The main challenge faced by using open-source media accounts to measure terrorism is that newsworthy cases are likely to gather the most attention. Nevertheless, relying on media reports to document global patterns over time is an improvement over relying on case studies or data from official sources, such as police, courts, or intelligence agencies. Further, the GTD was designed to minimize problems found in other open-source databases by collecting broadly and allowing researchers to filter cases to meet their specific research questions. We expect that the GTD will continue to evolve as technology improves and research interests change.

In Search of the Core of Terrorism

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We contend that there are two not fully overlapping senses of terrorism: the actor and the action ones.² The actor sense focuses on specific features of the groups involved in violence, such as their underground nature. The action sense points to particular characteristics of the violent event, such as the implied distinction between target and audience in the attack.

Whereas the actor sense understands terrorism as a specific type of insurgency, the action sense considers terrorism a tactic. The core of terrorism lies in underground groups (actor sense) employing coercive political violence (action sense). Still, this core does not cover terrorist violence carried out by insurgencies with territorial control, or actors often termed “guerrillas.” We argue that guerrillas use terrorism when they operate in areas out of their controlled territory.

The Actor-Based Approach for Understanding Terrorism

In the actor sense, terrorist groups are those that, unlike guerrillas, act underground, without de facto territorial control. By territorial control, we mean that the insurgents are able to set camps or bases, to establish roadblocks and eventually to rule over the local population. In the pre-9/11 literature on terrorism, many authors pointed out that an essential characteristic of terrorism is that perpetrators act underground (see, for example, Merari 1993).³ Most case studies on terrorism investigated violent groups that were underground, from the Montoneros and the Tupamaros in Latin America to the Red Brigades and ETA in Europe to Fatah in Israel or Dev Sol in Turkey.⁴ Confusion between terrorist groups and rural guerrillas rarely emerged.

Territorial control is explicitly considered in the civil war literature. Actually, it is a defining feature of a civil war. For Sambanis (2004), one of the conditions that a conflict must meet to be regarded as a civil war is that the insurgents have camps or bases within the state they are fighting against, which implies territorial control. Kalyvas’ (2006) theory on civil war violence relies on degrees of territorial control by the insurgents. Staniland’ (2012) typology of wartime political orders also contains the distribution of territorial control as a key attribute of the conflict.

Most civil wars are featured by guerrillas or irregular armies.⁵ It is worth noting that both guerrillas and terrorist groups challenge the state’s monopoly of violence; the difference is that the former challenges the state’s sovereignty, by segmenting or fragmenting it, whereas the latter does not. Based on this logic, it follows that the conflict between a terrorist group and the state is even more asymmetric than the conflict between a guerrilla and the state. Because of the constraints due to their underground nature, terrorist groups do not have

²In De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca (2011), we provide a more detailed explanation of the two meanings of terrorism and the relationship between them.

³Della Porta’s (1995) book on revolutionary terrorism in Europe includes a chapter about the logic of underground groups, connecting terrorism to their secret nature.

⁴Fatah had territorial control first in Jordan and later on in Lebanon, but never in Israel. It is therefore a gray case, with mixed elements of a guerrilla and a terrorist group.

⁵This, however, may change. See Kalyvas and Balcells (2010).

conventional military capabilities. This is what distinguishes them as a special category of rebel group. Given the absence of military power, terrorists rely exclusively on coercion, or the power to hurt.

In fact, the economic and political conditions under which these two types of rebel groups emerge are different.⁶ In underdeveloped countries, where states cannot effectively exert control over certain areas, such as jungles or mountains, guerrillas are more likely to emerge. By contrast, the greater the state capacity of the country, the more able the state will be to retain full control over their entire territory, and therefore, the more likely that insurgencies will remain underground and become terrorist.

The Action-Based Approach for Understanding Terrorism

The action sense of terrorism refers to some special features of violence that makes it terrorist in nature (See Dugan and LaFree's discussion above). For many, the crucial feature is the killing of civilians. But civilians are killed in all kinds of conflicts: interstate wars, intrastate wars, genocides, and terrorism. More than half of all people killed in interstate wars are civilians. The proportion is even higher in civil wars (see Downes 2008). On the contrary, there are some terrorist groups that kill combatants in a higher proportion than civilians (for example, the PIRA). How should we categorize the killing of a British soldier by a PIRA sniper in the streets of Belfast? If this is not terrorism, what is it then?

Why civilians are killed in conflicts is an important question, but one that goes much beyond the scope of terrorism. This is why we resist attempts to conceptualize terrorism in terms of targets (see Asal's contribution below): They are not sufficiently precise to distinguish terrorism from other types of violence in which civilians are also killed.

Still, some authors contend that the key distinction is not killing civilians vs. combatants, but the difference between attacks during peace time and attacks during war time (see Dugan and LaFree's contribution in this forum). Proponents of this approach claim that all political violence targeting citizens of a country that is not at war with the rebels should be considered as terrorism. Still, whether a conflict is considered a war or not depends, among other things, on the kind of enemy the state faces. Whereas nobody would object to describe the conflict caused by the FARC (a typical territorial insurgency) in Colombia as a civil war, it is dubious that someone would use the same description for the conflict between Germany and the Red Army Faction (a typical nonterritorial group). Given that states rarely declare war officially against their internal challengers, whether the attacks against civilians perpetrated by the FARC and the RAF will be considered terrorism or not will depend on the capacity of the insurgency to claim that they are actually involved in a war. As insurgencies with territorial control usually produce more deaths, the "war time" clause is therefore dependent on the strength of the insurgents.

If we leave aside targeting, the alternative is to focus on the quality of terrorist violence. This violence is coercive in nature, aimed at instilling fear in an audience (Hoffman 1998:44). Terrorists are able to coerce in a particular way, using tactics such as car bombs and other explosive devices, selective killings, kidnappings, and other similar actions. This is the repertoire of violence that we tend to regard as quintessentially terrorist. However, coercive violence covers much more than terrorism. A lot of civil war violence is also coercive (see below). Why certain forms of coercive violence are labeled terrorist? The operationalization of

⁶See De la Calle and Sánchez-Guena (2012).

the concept is challenging: just go into GTD and try to separate attacks that are terroristic from others that are not.

The Core of Terrorism and Beyond

The two senses of terrorism are not fully compatible with each other. However, we can at least explore the commonalities and differences between the two, as shown in Table 1.⁷ We find the core of terrorism when the two senses go in the same direction. This is the case when underground groups adopt the coercive tactics that we tend to associate with action sense terrorism. Clandestine groups, because of their lack of territorial control, are only able to perpetrate violent acts such as bombs, kidnappings, and assassinations. This type of warfare does not require large investments in manpower or weaponry, allowing a low number of rebels to easily operate in urban environments. Ideally, these rebels would rather seize territory, build parallel institutions, and run a more conventional war, but because of the constraints they face, they are forced to rely on terrorism for their fight. Armed groups such as ETA, the Montoneros, and the Japanese Red Army used terrorism because they could not liberate territory at all.

The core of terrorism, nonetheless, leaves aside a relevant portion of terrorist attacks: those carried out by insurgents that control territory. We contend that guerrillas resort to terrorist tactics when they act beyond their areas of control. For instance, when Shining Path tried to bring the rural fight to Lima, it was forced to plant car bombs to threaten the inhabitants of the capital, given the inability of rebels to control urban territory in the city. According to GTD1, 72% of the attacks carried out by this group in Peru's capital city were bombings. The same pattern holds for UNITA in Luanda or the FMLN in San Salvador. Thus, when the theater of operations reproduces the constraints of being underground, rebels end up using terrorism.

Table 1 presents a static categorization of forms of political violence. It is relatively easy, however, to extend its logic to a more dynamic approach. Thus, we should observe that when an armed group moves from clandestinity to open territorial control, the tactics change correspondingly, reducing the proportion of bombings as opposed to ambushes, small-scale battles, seizing villages and other tactics that are characteristic of territorial guerrillas. There is evidence for this: According to GTD1, Hezbollah's share of bomb attacks went down from 42% to 22% after the group gained a foothold in the South in 1990. Likewise, the left-wing rebel groups in El Salvador decreased from 45% before 1979, when they were still underground, to 25% afterward, when they moved into the countryside and seized territory.

TABLE 1. The Intersection of the Two Senses of Terrorism

<i>Action sense</i>	<i>Actor sense</i>	
	<i>Underground</i>	<i>Territorial control</i>
Coercive violence: IEDs, hijackings, bank robberies	Pure terrorism	Guerrilla operating clandestinely in state-controlled areas
Military power: Battles, ambushes	Proto-guerrilla	Pure guerrilla

⁷The table comes from De la Calle and Sánchez-Cuenca (2011).

In the end, there is a strong association between territorial control and armed tactics, with clandestine groups relying largely on terrorism. This has straight implications for the analysis of violence. If the unit of observation is the rebel group, we must be careful about the degree of territorial control it has; and if the unit is the attack, we must be careful that all the events included in the data sets are really terrorist. Given the problem of distinguishing a violent event as terroristic, scholars should make explicit their definition of terrorism and how it matches the data they use. Thus, we are skeptical about analyses that, as those of Findley and Young in this forum, conflate different types of violence just because they are all included in the same data set. It is necessary to distinguish tactics as well as to identify whether the actor that carries out these tactics acts in an area in which it holds territorial control or not.

A Research Agenda

Based on our previous discussion, some implications follow. On the one hand, if we are interested in the actor sense of terrorism, it is not obvious that data should be analyzed at the event level, as it is done currently by many empirical researchers. There has not been a serious discussion about why we should analyze data sets as they were originally built, at a maximum level of disaggregation. When the focus is on terrorist groups, the relevant unit should be the rebel group, comparing territorial and nonterritorial insurgencies in terms of lethality, recruitment, duration, as well as their different determinants in each case. This is clearly doable: as Dugan and LaFree emphasize in their contribution, GTD can be reanalyzed in many ways, at different levels of aggregation.

On the other hand, if we are interested in the action sense, then the goal should be to account for the variation in tactics that we find in insurgent behavior. Why do some insurgencies resort to terrorist tactics whereas others do not? What combinations of tactics are more often observed? How the choice of tactics is associated with the effectiveness of violent groups?

A particularly promising development should be the one explored in these pages by Findley and Young. The geographical analysis of violence is crucial in order to delimit areas controlled by the insurgents and to compare violence in them with violence in those regions in which the insurgents' grip of territory is lower or nonexistent.

We think that a more refined conceptualization of terrorism along these lines is needed if empirical research is to produce meaningful results. We do not aim at settling for once the debate on the nature of terrorism. According to our view, the very concept of terrorism is intrinsically ambiguous. Yet, by recognizing the sources of the ambiguity, we can be precise, specifying whether the unit of observation of our research question is an armed underground group or a certain tactic or a combination of the two. Depending on the answer, empirical results might be different. The current trend in the field is simply to count violent incidents, trying to explain variation in the number of incidents across countries or periods. This is potentially problematic, because terrorist incidents perpetrated by actors as different as states, underground groups, and guerrillas may have different causes and consequences. A more refined approach, in which theoretical considerations drive the choice of the dependent variable, seems worth trying.

John Brown, American Revolutionary War Guerillas in the South, the Treblinka Revolt and the Coding of Terrorist Organizations

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When one spends time studying terrorism, one starts to spend time at conferences and workshops with other people who study terrorism. Invariably, one of the people who is new in the room will start a discussion of how to define terrorism, and invariably, many other people in the room will roll their eyes or get a pained look on their face. There has been an ongoing debate about terrorism, and it often seems like it goes nowhere (Schmid and Jongman 2005). Unfortunately, while the debate on the definition of terrorism may be endless when it comes to quantifying terrorism or terrorist organizations, the coding of terrorism cannot be endless—at least for a particular analytical project. Goodwin is right when he says, “...explanation requires a clear analytic definition or demarcation of the phenomenon to be explained, even if, empirically, terrorism is not always easily distinguished from cognate phenomena” (Goodwin 2006:2027–2028). This need for clarity is a necessity to do quantitative research where the phenomenon being investigated needs to be assigned a value and is true if we are talking about events or if we are talking about organizations.

I say this with a full appreciation of the fact that whenever one turns an event or an organization into a number, one loses depth and one is prone to ignore the gray areas that are present in any social phenomena. This is the price quantitative research has to pay in order to gain an element of generalizability and confidence intervals, which are often lacking when we use other methodologies (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Landman 2004).

I will argue that ethics or more specifically the ethics of actions should be how we code terrorism and that terrorist organizations are those that are committing such acts (so that yes an organization can end this practice or stop being a terrorist organization). I could argue that this is based on a need for empirical analysis of what causes attacks against civilians and that coding terrorism as a lack of control of territory obfuscates our ability to understand the causal factors that are related to terrorism. I could argue that we should do so because that is how researchers have tended to do it in the past and we should continue to do so. Instead, I am going to argue that we should code terrorism this way because it intuitively fits best with what most people mean when they use the word terrorism because the word is inherently derogatory (Coady 2004:42).

In the following paragraphs, I lay out four ways to think about coding a group as a terrorist organization: personal preference, convenience, power differentials or ethics. The first definition I think on its face does not make sense, and the second is useful but not one that really needs exploration. In terms of deciding between the latter two approaches, I am going to employ a “sniff test”—which of these labels feels right when we try to group a small number of violent groups as terrorists or not as terrorists. I use four violent political entities far enough away in time and whose goals most people will agree were just, so that we can focus mostly on the key distinctions of power and ethics to see which of these “sniff” better as terrorist organizations and which do not. While Cooper, for example, dismisses the idea that defining terrorism is possible, he does argue that “...no one who has experienced terrorism in the flesh has the slightest

doubt about what it is or the sensations it engenders (Cooper 2001:891).” I think Cooper is making an important point here about what we mean when we use the word “terrorism.” Terrorism is a violation of certain basic human norms that (should) offend. Given stark examples of what we mean by terrorism, if we label an organization by the lack of territorial control (lack of power) and if we label a terrorist organization using an ethical standard (the intentional targeting of civilians), most of us will agree about how we should identify terrorism. In sum, the term “terrorism” should be applied using an ethical test. I use groups whose goals most readers will agree with so that the focus will not be on the ethics of the use of violence itself, but instead on the power of the group using the violence and the way the violence is used. As Coady argues “most U.S. citizens regard their own bloody revolution as justified and so are ill-placed to reject the idea of justified political violence against an existing government” (Coady 2004:40).

Coding Terrorism

One of the ways people have coded, labeled, or defined terrorism is by ascribing the actions or nature of terrorism either to the losers or more commonly to the actors they do not like. Chomsky (2002:viii), for example, argues that terrorism is really only defined as violence “committed by ‘their’ side” and that most “real” terrorism is committed by states. Pavlovi (2009:12) makes a similar point when he argues that during the time when Kansas was deemed Bleeding Kansas, we identify the pro-Slavery Quantrill raiders as terrorists but not the pro-Union antislavery Jayhawkers because “the Union won the civil war” (12). There are some who argue that the goals of the actor are the right way to define terrorism (Held 2004). This then makes any labeling relevant only for those who agree that a certain group are the good guys or the bad guys, which is not a sound scientific basis for trying to identify why certain kinds of violence happen or stop happening. If we are trying to code terrorism (either nonstate or state) in any meaningful way that is empirically rigorous (valid and reliable), then this is a labeling metric that we need to reject out of hand. For reliability purposes, terrorists and nonterrorists need to be divided in a way that that is not simply the product of a whim or the interests of one party or another.

Another way to code terrorism—and probably the dominant way done by most scholars—is simply to use existing databases and accept their definitions and coding schema. This often occurs, for example, when someone uses *International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events (ITERATE)* (Mickolus et al. 2004) or the *Global Terrorism Database (GTD)* (LaFree and Dugan 2007). The inclusion criteria of the GTD are discussed in the section by Dugan and LaFree so I will not reiterate them fully, but I will note that GTD allows the researcher to only look at cases that target noncombatants with the threat or act of violence (START 2011:5).

If I wanted to, for example, code an organization as a terrorist organization, it would be quite simple to label a terrorist organization as one that has committed an incident that fits with the GTD. Alternatively, I may restrict my analysis to only international or transnational terrorism with organizations that fit the inclusion criteria of the ITERATE database. There is nothing inherently invalid with this approach, but it does abdicate the decision of the researcher about what terrorism is to the researchers who have created the existing database.

There are, however, two other ways to think about terrorism that force the researcher to make critical decisions regarding terrorism. One is to identify terrorism using an ethical lens (both ITERATE and GTD appear to be built at least partially on this criteria because they both specify that the target is not a military target (LaFree and Dugan 2007; Mickolus et al. 2004)) and the other is what we might think of as a power criteria.

Sánchez-Cuenca and De la Calle (Sanchez-Cuenca & De la Calle 2009) make this distinction when they speak of an action sense of terrorism and an actor sense of terrorism. By actor sense, they draw the line between those that control territory and those that do not. Those that control territory are not terrorists and those that do not control territory are terrorists (2009). They argue that this definition of terrorism allows us to have a better understanding of what terrorism is and why terrorists behave the way they do. Specifically, they argue that:

Terrorist groups are different from other insurgencies because of the extreme asymmetry of power between them and the state. On the one hand, terrorist groups are unable to take control of territory because the state is powerful enough to avoid losing control within its borders. Hence, terrorist organizations are clandestine or underground (McCormick 2003, p. 486). The contrast with guerrillas is immediately clear: Guerrillas control some territory, usually in the jungle or in the mountains, that is de facto liberated from the state's sovereignty. This is why we tend to say that ETA... in the Basque Country or the Red Brigades in Italy are terrorist groups, whereas the FARC... in Colombia or the LTTE... in Sri Lanka are guerrillas. (2009:34–35)

Clearly, here, terrorism is being coded by identifying it with structural weakness. The key issue for them is not if violent actors are blowing up soldiers or civilians but whether or not they have capabilities. Those who point out that terrorism is often used only to identify one's enemies or the powerless might object that they are being unfair (Blakeley 2007), but I believe they are sincere and they are trying to identify terrorist groups in a way that is objective in the sense that they would apply their criteria fairly whether they are in favor of or opposed to the goals of the organization.

Another way of identifying terrorism though is by seeing it as being based on ethical choices the violent actor makes to target security personnel (who by the ethics of war are part of the "game") or to target civilians (who are not). While some might say that this is silly and in war "You do what needs to be done to win (Coady 2004:42)," others would argue that the word "terrorism" has a fundamental component of "moral revulsion" (Coady 2004:42) or "moral repugnance" (Primoratz 1990) that should not be ignored when the word is used. This is one of the reasons it is such a useful smear as a label.

As (Scheffler 2006:16) argues:

I do think that the word "terrorism" is morally suggestive precisely because "terror" is its linguistic root and that if we define the term in a way that effaces or even breaks the connection between terrorism and terror, as the definitions just mentioned do, then we are liable to miss some of the moral saliences toward which the word "terrorism" gestures.

If we believe that violence sometimes should be used but that some types of violence should not be, then there is great value in distinguishing terrorism from an ethical perspective whether it be state terror or nonstate terror (although the focus of this particular discussion is on nonstate terrorism). This type of definition accepts the possibility of "...justified revolutionary violence in extreme circumstances (Coady 2004:40)" while still drawing ethical lines as well as analytical lines that can be used to explain why sometimes actors use terrorist violence and why sometimes actors use violence that is not targeted at a proscribed group.

The question though is which of these definitional foundations—power or ethics—makes the most intuitive sense for how we want to apply the word "terrorism" when we are turning it into a number to be compared with many other events or actors. In order to clarify this question in the remainder of this essay, I identify four violent actors who I believe most people will agree are justified in

taking up arms. After describing each group briefly, I will present three charts—the latter two charts will sort the groups using a power coding and an ethical coding, letting the reader decide which of these sorting approaches best passes the smell test of what terrorism is or is not.

Groups for Comparison

I have chosen four violent actors that all have goals, which I think most people would find compelling. Two of those groups were Jewish resistance efforts during the Holocaust, another is the Whigs in the South during the American Revolutionary War fighting the British, and the last is a group of abolitionist Jayhawkers led by John Brown before the Civil War in Bleeding Kansas. Fighting against the Nazi genocide efforts, fighting for the creation of the United States, and fighting against slavery are goals that I assume most people would agree worthwhile. Briefly, I will describe all four groups starting with the earliest historically. I will then describe their placement in Table 1, which divides them up between groups that intentionally targeted civilians and those that did not, as well as those that controlled territories and those that did not.

The American Revolution was one that became brutal—especially between loyalist colonists and their pro-revolution Whig opponents, who controlled backwater areas during much of the revolution in the South (Keithly 2001; Rubin 2010). According to Piecuch, “Anyone who challenged rebel authority was likely to suffer terribly. Loyalists were shot, hanged, beaten; rebel militia burned Indian towns and crops, killed Indians regardless of age or sex, and sold captives into slavery...” (2008:334). In Table 1, the Whigs fall into box 4 because they controlled territory and they attacked civilians.

John Brown is famous for his attack on Harper’s Ferry (Oates 1984). Less well known is his activity in Kansas during the period leading up to the Civil War and the start of his use of violence as a tool of abolition (Du Bois and Roediger 2001). The proslavery Bushwhackers and antislavery Jayhawkers were often merciless. McPherson (2003:737–738) describes this, “...guerrilla fighting in Missouri produced a form of terrorism that exceeded anything else in the war. Jayhawking Kansans and bushwhacking Missourians took no prisoners, killed in cold blood, plundered and pillaged and burned... without stint.” After a raid on Lawrence Kansas by proslavery forces in 1,856 where the town surrendered but was still “subjected to an orgy of burning and looting (Bordewich 2005:414),” Brown decided that he and his men had to respond. Brown and his group of followers attacked the village of Pottawatomie. While the five men they dragged out of their houses and hacked to death were proslavery men, they were not armed and had not killed anyone themselves (Du Bois and Roediger 2001:76). Justifying himself, Brown said, “God is my Judge...We were justified under the circumstances (Bordewich 2005:414).” In Table 1, Brown and his war party fall into box 3 because they did not control territory and they attacked civilians.

The death camp of Treblinka was efficient at killing people with a death toll of over 800,000 (Niewyk and Nicosia 2003:210). On August 2, 1943, prisoners who had formed an organized resistance movement violently revolted. After lighting buildings on fire, some prisoners attacked guards while most tried to

TABLE 1. Control of Territory and Targeting of Civilians

<i>Not targeting civilians</i>	<i>Targeting civilians</i>
No control of territory (1) Treblinka revolts	(3) John Brown
Control of territory (2) Warsaw ghetto uprising	(4) American Revolutionary Guerillas in the South

escape (Arad 1999). The Camp commander described what he saw: "...Looking out of my window I could see some Jews on the other side of the inner fence—they must have jumped down from the roof of the SS billets and they were shooting.... (Arad 1999:293)." They injured one German soldier and killed several Ukrainian guards (Arad 1999), and several hundred prisoners escaped with about 100 surviving (The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies 2011). In Table 1, the Treblinka underground falls into box 1 because they did not control territory and they did not attack civilians.

The final violent political group to consider is the organized resistance to the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto, which held on to the territory of the Ghetto and fought against the Nazis from April 19 to May 16 of 1943, or until the Ghetto was reduced to rubble. Before the revolt, over 450,000 Jews had been killed in the ghetto or deported to Treblinka (Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies 2011). The Germans were forced out of the ghetto, and for about a month, the Jews controlled part of Warsaw while fighting constantly with the SS. After the uprising, the Jews in the area were all killed or deported although some managed to fight on (Kurzman 1993). In Table 1, the Warsaw Ghetto underground falls into box 2 because (at least for a very brief time) they did control territory and they did not attack civilians.⁸ The remnants who survived continued to fight on, sniping at soldiers, after the ghetto was captured. They were called the "rubble resistance" (Kurzman 1993:336). If we included them in the sample, they would go into box 1 with the Treblinka revolt for they did not control territory and they did not attack civilians.

A Brief "Sniff Test"

Any coding of any social science concept can be problematic, and there will be challenging gray zones. When it comes to coding terrorism, I have tried to pick four groups that I assume most will agree had legitimate grievances and a right to consider the use of violence. Fighting for freedom, challenging slavery, and struggling against genocide are compelling reasons for resistance. Nonetheless, if we are to code terrorism, and we are not going to do it based on how much or how little we like the goals of the violent political actors, then we need to be consistent. We need to agree that like them or not, some of the people fighting for a good cause may also be using terrorism. Table 2 breaks our four groups into two categories of what terrorism is by operationalizing terrorism as territorial control. Table 3 does it by operationalizing terrorism as targeting civilians. If we code terrorism as targeting civilians, then John Brown and the American Revolutionary Guerillas who had decimated Indian villages need to be coded as terrorists. If we use territorial control as our coding metric Brown stays a terrorist but the American Guerillas who committed many atrocities in the South avoid this distinction.

TABLE 2. Terrorism as Territorial Control

<i>Territorial control</i>	
Not terrorists—control territory	Warsaw ghetto uprising American Revolutionary Guerillas in the South
Terrorists—do not control territory	Treblinka revolts John Brown

⁸Members of the underground did attack members of the Zagiew militia who were Jews who collaborated with the Nazis and spied on the resistance movement (Piotrowski 2007). Members of this group were under the control of the paramilitary Gestapo and were armed and considered a militia (Apfelbaum 2007:63). Because they were agents of the Gestapo and were armed by the Gestapo, I do not consider them civilians. In the same way, I do not consider the members of the Warsaw Ghetto agents to be civilians because they were using violence politically.

TABLE 3. Terrorism as Targeting Civilians

<i>Civilian Targeting</i>	
Not terrorists—not targeting civilians	Treblinka revolts Warsaw ghetto uprising
Terrorists—targeting civilians	American Revolutionary Guerillas in the South John Brown

In addition, the Treblinka underground that killed no civilians but did kill Nazi soldiers and guards becomes a terrorist organization. The question of how we should code terrorist organizations is thus (from a sniff test perspective) simple—given the behavior and territorial control which of these actors should we be calling terrorists?

Is the key factor in labeling an organization terrorist because they are so weak that they cannot control territory or that they commit atrocities? Given the moral repugnance attached to the word, I am sure that the British Empire, Nazi Germany, Southern states before the civil war and probably all states faced with internal challenges would prefer that weakness allows them to label an organization as terrorist. Should all weak challengers to power be labeled as terrorists? Should the label of moral turpitude fall away only after a group is strong enough?

I do not think so—both for ethical reasons and for reasons related to the study of terrorism. Coding terrorism based on targeting civilians actually allows us to investigate the structural and cultural conditions that make it more or less likely that an organization will be a terrorist organization without assuming key issues related to their resources. In fact by coding terrorism in this way, we can test the impact of controlling territory on the likelihood that a group will target civilians. My suspicion is that Sánchez-Cuenca and De la Calle are right that those who do not control territory are more likely to attack civilians. Just because they do not control territory though, we should not ipso facto label them as terrorists.

Using Geography to Understand Terrorist Actors and Actions

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Scholarly interest in the causes and consequences of terrorism has increased dramatically since September 11, 2001 (Young and Findley 2011). While scholars such as Todd Sandler, Leonard Weinberg, and Martha Crenshaw had been studying terrorism for decades, most conflict scholars studied interstate wars and great power dynamics during the Cold War, and ethnic conflict and civil war in the period from 1991 to 2001. With this increased interest in terrorism, new data and methods are being used to understand terrorism.

Arguments over what constitutes the concept of terrorism have complicated efforts to generate cumulative knowledge for many years. Data and operationalizations can

de facto push the study of terrorism into a particular conceptualization. Sandler and colleagues, through their dissemination of the widely used ITERATE data, started a movement toward thinking about terrorism from an events-based perspective (Sandler 1995) rather than looking at the presence or dynamics of groups. The GTD data from LaFree and Dugan (2007) continues this tradition and expands the data to domestic terrorism. The expansion of these data implies that counting terrorist events (or categorizing these events in some manner) is the best way to understand the causes and consequences of terrorism. As De la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca suggest in this forum as well as in other articles (Sánchez-Cuenca and De La Calle 2009), there are other ways to conceptualize and operationalize terrorism.

These distinctions matter. For example, Sandler (1995) argues that using terrorist groups rather than events as an indicator for terrorism could lead to erroneous conclusions over the relationship between regime type and terrorism. De la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca argue that action-based approaches to studying terrorism, such as Sandler's, are inherently flawed because it is difficult to explain an action that many different actors can pursue. Instead they suggest *terrorists* are different than *guerrillas* based on capabilities and thus the degree to which each insurgent actor attempts to control territory. Thus, action- and actor-based approaches to conceptualizing terrorism matter as they account for events differently. If the actor-based approach is correct, action-based databases are *overcounting* terrorism by including violent events by nonterrorist actors. If the action-based approach is correct, then actor-based approaches would *undercount*. But how much is at stake? How much undercounting or overcounting is taking place?

One way to begin to understand the ramifications of these approaches is to consider the geographical distribution of attacks. Recently, we georeferenced terrorist events from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to examine the overlap between terrorist events and civil wars (Findley and Young 2012). If we adopt the actor-based approach, we would not count attacks by insurgents in areas that they control as terrorism.⁹ If we adopt an action-based approach, then any event in the country would be counted. These maps and event plots will not resolve the debate over how best to conceptualize and operationalize terrorism, but they should help us consider the utility of each approach and should suggest some future considerations. For example, they raise the important questions of how to categorize events committed by rebel groups that most would consider terrorism (for example, bombing in a market place) and also how to categorize events committed by nonrebel groups that most would consider guerrilla warfare (for example, attacks on police or a military facility). We examine two countries, India and Peru, in the context of civil conflict to explore this debate. We selected these countries as they provide variation on numbers of violent events, types of violent events, and actors involved in violent activities. These two countries provide enough diversity along these dimensions to provide an initial exploration, which we hope future work will consider in more depth.

India

Figure 1 is a map of India depicting the locations of violent events associated with the ten groups carrying out the most attacks from 1970 to 2004. The yellow shading indicates a civil war zone, defined by Rød (2003), which is based on the

⁹Weinstein (2007) and Kalyvas (2006) both investigate the reasons for indiscriminate violence against civilians in the context of civil conflict. Both generally avoid using the term "terrorism" when describing this type of violence.

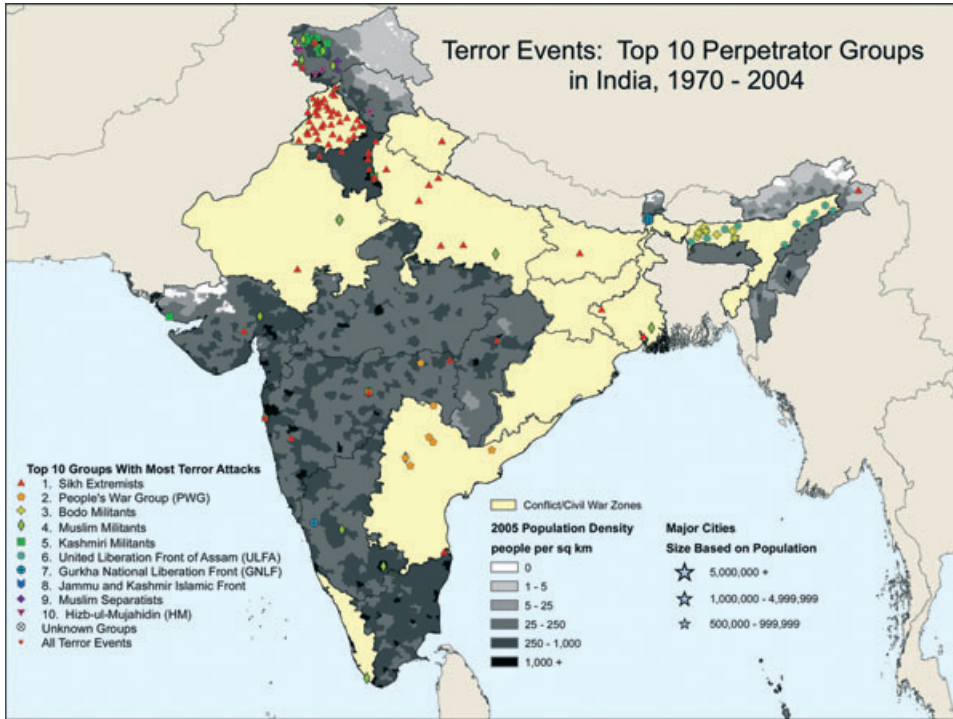


FIG 1. Terror Events: Top 10 Perpetrator Groups in India, 1970–2004.

Uppsala conflict database, and is designed to capture the joint production of battle-related violence, rather than terrorism. The stars represent major cities, and the other symbols represent GTD events, but have different shapes to differentiate the perpetrator group.

As the map shows, most of the violent events occur in the civil war zones, such as Jammu and Kashmir. Punjab also has many events associated with Sikh militants. In an action-based approach, all of these events count as terrorism. In contrast, an actor-based approach would count many of the events perpetrated by the groups in the zones of the conflict as something else (guerrilla attacks). Other events outside of the zones of insurgent control or unconnected to the main combatant groups might count as terrorism, but regardless the number of events would decrease substantially.

Peru

The implications of these two conceptualizations are even starker when investigating Peru. Figure 2 displays a map similar to Figure 1. The yellow zones are the areas of civil war conflict, and the symbols relate to attacks by the ten most prolific groups in Peru from 1970 to 2004. As the figure demonstrates, the Shining Path was responsible for the bulk of attacks in Peru during this time. It is quite difficult to establish how close the Shining Path was to winning the conflict and how much of the country the group effectively controlled.

With this caveat in mind, a poll taken in Lima in 1991 found that 32% of the people surveyed believed the Shining Path would eventually win (McClintock

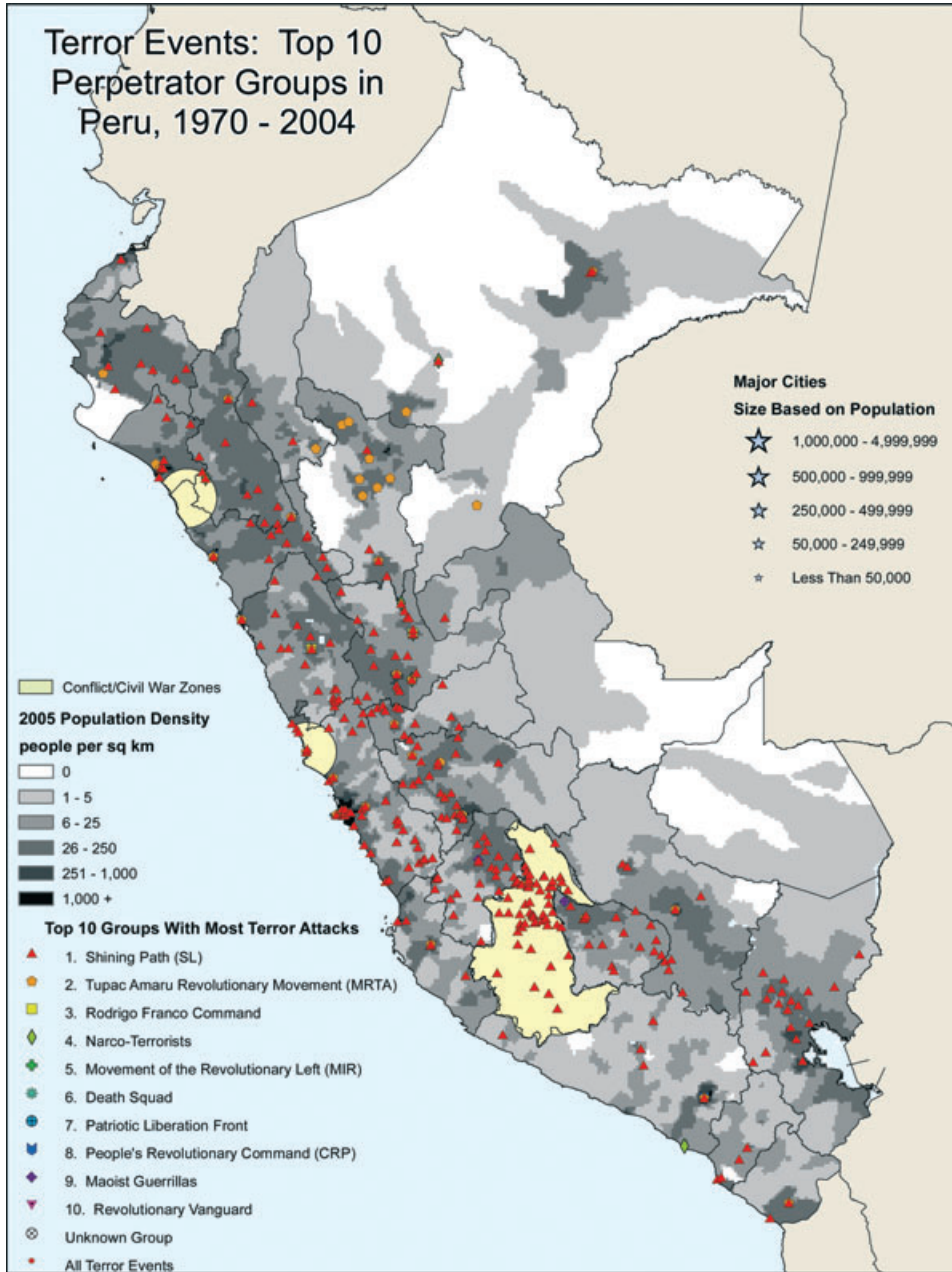


FIG 2. Terror Events: Top 10 Perpetrator Groups in Peru, 1970–2004.

1998:10). They controlled large portions of the countryside, sieged the capital city, and influenced over 50% of primary educators (Mcclintock 1998). An actor-based approach would treat a car bomb in Lima, such as the attacks in July of 1992 in the wealthy *Miraflores* district, as guerrilla attacks. As numerous accounts suggest, however, the Shining Path repeatedly terrorized both adversaries and potential allies as a *strategy* of war (Stern 1998).

Lessons Learned

When groups such as the Shining Path are controlling territory, which at least some of these are, the actor-based approach does not consider their violent acts as terrorism. This seems to fail a simple face validity test. If blowing up civilians in a shopping district is not considered terrorism, then what does constitute terrorism? Also using an actor-based approach leads to a large number of events that should not be counted. In contrast, action-based approach would count everything. This also has costs as some of the violence perpetrated by the Shining Path in the Huallaga Valley, for example, may be more related to criminality and coca than to political/strategic objectives (Weinstein 2007).

Moving Forward

Our examination of the geography of terrorism has limitations. We need better data on zones of government and rebel control—rather than just general civil war zones—among these violent actors. We could then use GIS effectively to examine events in these zones of control to obtain a better understanding of whether such events are qualitatively different than acts committed by groups controlling no territory. We worry that doing so using an actor-based approach would undercount terrorist events far more than an action-based approach would overcount.

We also think that there is a danger in reifying certain categories of actors. As Tilly (2004:5) argues, “social scientists who attempt to explain sudden attacks on civilian targets should doubt the existence of a distinct, coherent class of actors (terrorists) who specialize in a unitary form of political action (terror) and thus should establish a separate variety of politics.” We concur and suggest studying interaction between states and nonstate actors and the conditions that promote the use of certain types of contention.

With this in mind, we think there are reasons that oppositional groups target civilians instead of the military and may potentially specialize in a particular form of violent interaction at one time or another. Whether the causes of distinct forms of violence is a result of ideology, capabilities, the strategic environment, or something else, we think that examining these events in time and space can help explain these differences. Whereas the traditional quantitative study of terrorism focuses on events to the detriment of groups, future work that explains why groups produce or end violence is likely to help unpack questions related to the beginnings and end of violence better than a simple event focus (See, for example, Miller 2012). In particular, mapping where groups operate combined with the acts they perpetrate will allow a better synthesis that avoids compartmentalizing actions and actors.

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