

## 2 Conceptual Considerations

### 2.1 Why They Fight: Examining Terrorists' Motives

Scholars of terrorism studies have long struggled to agree on a common understanding of what constitutes terrorism. To date, scholars have agreed on little more than the fact that terrorism is difficult to define.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, more than 100, if not more than 200, modern definitions of terrorism have been formulated (Easson and Schmid, 2011). These emphasize different aspects of terrorism, such as the underlying motivations, applied tactics, or chosen targets.

#### 2.1.1 *Assuming Political Motives as Prime Drivers*

While no consensus has been reached on how to define terrorism or terrorists, an oft-cited meta-study by Schmid and Jongman (1988) provides fruitful insight into the most relevant aspects of how scholars understand terrorism. The two researchers analyzed various academic and official definitions of terrorism and identified three main components as being vital to almost every definition: (1) the use (or threat) of violence; (2) political objectives; and (3) the intention of sowing fear in a target population as a means to achieve these political objectives. These elements can be found in a large number of academic definitions of terrorism.<sup>9</sup> They are also part of the widely influential definition of the U.S. Department of State, according to which “terrorism is defined as politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience” (*cited in* Shughart, 2011: 127). An oft-cited definition of terrorism in the academic field, proposed by Todd Sandler, emphasizes similar characteristics. He finds terrorism to be “the

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<sup>8</sup> This is also related to the fact that governments have used the notion of “terrorism” to try to discredit political organizations and actors (Palmer, 2007: 250).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Josiger (2006).

premeditated use, or threat of use, of extra-normal violence or brutality to gain a political objective through intimidation or fear of a targeted audience. To qualify as terrorism, an act must be politically motivated; that is, the act must attempt to influence government policy at home or abroad. Incidents that are solely motivated for profit and do not directly or indirectly support a political objective are not considered to be terrorism” (Sandler, 2003: 780).

In line with these definitions, many researchers and political decision-makers understand terrorism as a strategy intended to create fear and to influence an audience beyond the immediate victims of an attack in order to achieve political objectives.<sup>10</sup> The notion of political motives actually allows for a broad range of ideologies and objectives to be covered, including left-wing, right-wing, nationalist/separatist, and religious.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, terrorism is considered to be instrumental, as it is not an end in itself but is adopted to accomplish a political goal (Crenshaw, 1988: 13; Richardson, 2006: 21).

### *2.1.2 Assuming Alternative Motives as Prime Drivers*

In reality, terrorist actors may not only be motivated to achieve their political objectives but may also have other goals. Such an approach requires a broader understanding of terrorism that goes beyond a purely politically-oriented definition of terrorism. Economically motivated terrorism represents one of these conceivable alternatives. But this notion needs clarification, since it may have different meanings (see Van Um, 2011: 165). First, economically motivated terrorism can be understood as violence that seeks to cause economic damage and inflict as many casualties as possible. Such argumentation and behavior may still be in line with political motives. Terrorists would then try, as an ultimate goal, to force concessions

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<sup>10</sup> While many researchers highlight the psychological element of terrorism, spreading fear is also part of other forms of violence. In fact, the psychological component of warfare and of violence in civil wars has long been recognized (Neumann and Smith, 2007: 14; Sánchez-Cuenca and De la Calle, 2009: 33).

<sup>11</sup> For an elaboration of these specific types of terrorist ideologies, see Josiger (2006: 4-5). Hoffman and McCormick (2004) and Kydd and Walter (2006) offer different typologies, according to which terrorist groups usually have one of the following strategic aims: territorial change, policy change, social revolution, or status quo maintenance.

from a targeted government by causing widespread disruption (Libicki et al., 2007: 11; Van Um, 2011: 165). For some terrorist groups, causing damage might constitute an end in itself and replace political goals as the ultimate object. In these cases “we should observe that attacks cause a serious, maybe even debilitating, cost on the targeted economies (...)” (Berrebi, 2009: 174). Second, economically motivated terrorism can also be part of criminal behavior (see Van Um, 2011: 165). Accordingly, instead of striving for political objectives, actors may pursue terrorist means to enrich themselves, even if their official agenda might state otherwise. However, most authors treat such behavior, which lacks political demands, as a crime, not as terrorism (see Richardson, 2006; Sandler, 2003; Schmid, 2011). This requires that terrorism and crime be distinguishable from one another and, in fact, a number of unique features have been said to characterize terrorism and crime respectively: terrorism is said to be motivated by political objectives, while criminals are primarily interested in economic profit (Schneckener, 2012: 471-472). Terrorists aim for political change, while criminals try to keep the status quo beneficial to their illegal activities (Gupta, 2008: 148). Criminals try to avoid media and public attention, while terrorists desire such attention to make their cause known (Hutchinson and O'Malley, 2007: 1100). These criteria may lack completeness but indicate that terrorism and crime can be distinguished from each other.

However, terrorism and crime have converged. This has been highlighted in a number of recent academic publications and reports (see Dishman, 2005; Hübschle, 2011). This convergence has, furthermore, been addressed in politics. The United Nations Security Council, for example, adopted Resolution 1373 which “[n]otes with concern the close connection between international terrorism and transnational organized crime, illicit drugs, money-laundering, illegal arms-trafficking” (UN Security Council, 2001). Crime and terrorism have converged with respect to a number of characteristics. Some terrorist groups and criminal organizations have repeatedly cooperated on a case-by-case basis or even permanently (Dishman, 2005: 246; Gupta, 2008: 149). One report notes that this applies, in particular, to the connection between narcotics trafficking and insurgency groups (Berry et al., 2002: 2). Terrorist groups have, to a growing extent, also made use of criminal activities to seek funding for their political struggles. This has largely been due to the decline of state sponsorship which has forced many groups to find new sources of funding. Criminal

methods have ranked high among these (Brzoska, 2009: 89; Rollins and Wyler, 2012: 9-10). Hezbollah, for instance, has started smuggling methamphetamine, cocaine, and cigarettes. ETA and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) have been involved in drug trafficking and money laundering (Berry et al., 2002: 4-5). Al Qaeda cells in Spain and Italy and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka have financed their activities through the use of credit card fraud, and al Qaeda has also been active in smuggling commodities, such as diamonds (Hutchinson and O'Malley, 2007: 1097). However, even if terrorist groups have been involved in criminal activities, this does not necessarily imply the absence of political motives. But it may be the case that, for some groups, self-enrichment has actually become dominant as a driver, so that political motives stand behind.

As an alternative, it has been suggested that terrorists are not driven by economic or political motives but rather by social motives. From an individual perspective, ideology and political objectives might play a less important role than expected and terrorist acts might not primarily aim at achieving political concessions. Rather, "a desire to belong to a group and gain the material and psychological rewards provided by membership" (Moore, 2008: 27) could be an essential factor. Terrorists' behavior might then reflect an intention to develop and intensify social linkages. From a group perspective, keeping the group alive as a social unit then becomes the prime concern (Abrahms, 2008: 96; Crenshaw, 1988: 19; Neumann, 2002: 122). It is important to emphasize that survival is also clearly relevant for politically or criminally motivated terrorist groups. Politically motivated terrorist groups, for example, need to make sure that their group survives as a precondition for the success of their political struggle. But the model of social rationality goes further and suggests that group survival alone may suffice. This is in line with organizational theories and, if social motives were actually prevalent, it would follow that "The survival of the group is no longer a means to an end but an end in itself" (McCormick, 2003: 490).

Terrorism may be instrumental violence, yet terrorists may seek objectives other than political ones. Rather, social and economic motives may drive the behavior of terrorist actors. Beyond that, and by contrast to instrumental violence, we may think of terrorism as featuring expressive characteristics (see Boyle, 2010: 191; McCormick, 2003: 480; Merari, 1993:

237).<sup>12</sup> Expressive violence is emotionally based and has its roots in factors such as revenge, honor, personal grudges, and anger. It is often characterized as unplanned and spontaneous. Most importantly, it does not seek a specific objective beyond emotional satisfaction and is largely unconnected to the cause of a conflict (Boyle, 2010: 191-192). One should keep in mind, however, that this distinction is somewhat artificial, since instrumental and expressive violence often take place in combination. As a consequence, it is often difficult to determine, with any certainty, the underlying motive of violence (ibid. 192-193).<sup>13</sup> As with the previous concepts, expressive violence may be group-based. But it may also be personal violence, conducted by individual or several members of terrorist groups in the form of unsanctioned behavior. This form of violence would result in a move away from the conception of terrorist groups as unitary actors, which underlies the political rationality model.

### 2.1.3 *Overview of the Motives*

The concepts of terrorism which were discussed previously are illustrated in Table 1. Clearly, individual terrorists and terrorist groups may pursue multiple motives in reality, and it is easily conceivable that economic, social, and political motives often go hand in hand. Terrorist groups may, for example, be primarily interested in achieving political goals but, beyond that, also seek to enrich themselves. The distinction made, therefore, reflects an ideal type of classification. Beyond that, the concepts introduced may not be exhaustive, yet this author perceives them as covering the most likely sources of motivation for terrorist groups.

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<sup>12</sup> This basic distinction has not only been applied in terrorism research but also, for instance, in the civil war literature (see Kalyvas, 2006; McDoom, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> The work of Frantz Fanon (1963), influential writer on decolonization struggles, helps to illustrate this point. Both instrumental and expressive motives have featured prominently in his writings. Accordingly, he describes violence not only instrumentally as a means to achieve independence from the control of European colonizers, but also in expressive terms as a "cleansing force." Fanon refers to this as follows: "It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (94).

**Table 1:** Assumptions about terrorist groups' motivations

| <b>Political motive<br/>(instrumental)</b>   | <b>Social motive<br/>(instrumental)</b>                   | <b>Criminal motive<br/>(instrumental)</b>            | <b>Expressive motive<br/>(non-instrumental)</b>                   |
|--|---|--|---|
| Terrorism as a means to further political goals or to prevent undesired political change | Terrorism as a means to preserve the existence of a group | Terrorism as a means for groups to enrich themselves | Terrorism conducted for personal purposes or as symbolic violence |

Terrorism may be understood in a number of different ways. Following most of the literature, political motives are considered to be the major driver for terrorist actors even if additional motives may play a certain role. The assumption of political rationality not only requires terrorists to be politically motivated but, furthermore, requires that their behavior be a rational choice. This is elaborated in the next section.

## **2.2 How They Fight: Terrorism and Rational Choice**

The assumption of political rationality not only asks that terrorists be politically motivated, but also that they pursue the achievement of their objectives in a rational manner. It “is the conventional wisdom among terrorism scholars that (...) terrorists are rational” (Miller, 2009: 1). As a consequence, many researchers in the social sciences have based their studies on assumptions of rational choice theory explicitly or on the political rationality model, which specifies terrorists' preference structure (see Section 1.1). But what does rational choice theory offer as an added value for the study of terrorist groups' behavior? What standards of rationality exist? And how have these developed in the first place?

### *2.2.1 The Evolution of Rational Choice Theory*

Rational choice theory has long been the basic paradigm of economic theory. A long-standing concept in economics, the idea of rational behavior expanded into the field of political science in the 1950s. Pioneering work by scholars such as Anthony Downs (1957), Mancur Olson (1965), and William Riker (1962) made use of these ideas for the study of human behavior in political science. This work aimed at explaining the behavior of, among

others, voters, governments, bureaucracies, and interest groups (Green and Shapiro, 1994: 1; Kirchgässner, 2008a: 3). Since the 1960s and 1970s, rationalist approaches have been applied to other academic fields, including sociology, psychology, and law. To date, RCT has been established as an influential framework or model to understand human behavior in a variety of scientific disciplines.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that the concept has not been the subject of widespread criticism, and many researchers have even regarded this concept as a complete failure. The reasons for this are discussed more closely in Sub-section 2.2.3. The next sub-section starts reviewing the basics of rational choice theory.

### 2.2.2 *The Premises of Rational Choice Theory*

Different standards of rational behavior have been developed, as rational choice theory is, in fact, far from being a unified theory. There is a lack of consensus on basic definitions and on the concept of “rationality,” in particular, which is understood in a number of different ways within the academic literature (Green and Shapiro, 1994: 13; Sen, 1984: 105; Wolf, 2005: 16).

#### *Thin and Thick Models of Rational Choice Theory*

To start with, one can distinguish between thin and thick models of rational choice theory. Thin models are comprised of the least demanding requirements and consider behavior to be rational, as long as means are used to achieve any ends. From this view, “rational behavior is understood as ‘the way people act’” (Korobkin and Ulen, 2000: 1061). If we allow for such a very loose understanding of rationality, basically everything could be understood within the framework of rational choice theory. Research has usually used more demanding standards.

A thicker concept of RCT requires actors to have stable and consistent preferences over all outcomes (*Preference Axiom*) (Elster, 1986: 16;

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<sup>14</sup> See Kahneman (2011: 270), Kirchgässner (2008a: 135), Nau (1999: 1), and Wolf (2005: 15).

McFadden, 1999: 74; Nau, 1999: 5).<sup>15</sup> In technical terms, preferences are required to be connected and transitive, which basically means that people know what they want in all situations.<sup>16</sup> Rational choice usually makes no further restrictions on the form of preferences: “The only test of rationality is not whether a person’s beliefs and preferences are reasonable, but whether they are internally consistent. A rational person can believe in ghosts so long as all her other beliefs are consistent with the existence of ghosts. A rational person can prefer being hated over being loved, so long as his preferences are consistent” (Kahneman, 2011: 411).

Rational choice theory also usually postulates how actors make decisions based on their configuration of preferences and the resources available (*Decision Rule*). Nau (1999: 7) calls this “a link between mind and body, or between preference and choice.” Basically, a number of decision rules are conceivable. Yet, an actor is usually assumed to choose his or her most-preferred alternative or, in other words, the option which (by expectation) comes closest to his or her preferences (Becker, 1979: 153; Diekmann and Voss, 2004: 14-15). In order to determine the optimal method of achieving their goals, actors are required to evaluate the expected payoff of their available options before they resort to a specific course of action (Kirchgässner, 2008a: 12). Consistently choosing the very option which promises the best result or, in other words, the highest utility, reflects behavior that maximizes one’s own utility (function) (Diekmann and Voss, 2004: 17; Nau, 1999: 6).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Preferences can be understood as “comparative judgments between entities” (McFadden, 1999: 74) or as “*hypothetical* choices between hypothetical alternatives (acts)” (Nau, 1999: 4).

<sup>16</sup> Connectivity means that any two alternatives can be compared in any case. The condition of transitivity demands that actors compare alternatives and rank them consistently, according to their underlying configuration of preferences. This way, an actor preferring alternative *a* over *b*, and *b* over *c*, is said to prefer *a* over *c* to have consistent (transitive) preferences (Green and Shapiro, 1994: 14-15).

<sup>17</sup> The premise of utility maximization was relaxed in rational choice model building. Instead of limiting oneself to the idea of comprehensive utility maximization, this idea was early replaced by the notion of “expected utility maximization” (originally developed by von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1953). This concept integrates risk and uncertainty into decision-making, so that the outcome of a certain action may be estimated only with a certain probability (Diekmann and Voss, 2004: 17). This assumption seemed to better reflect human behavior which routinely occurs in the face of uncertainty.



Yet, there are limitations to such a utility maximizing behavior. People are usually not able to attain all of their desired objectives. Rather, their behavior is restricted by issues, such as financial means and time. Since actors have only limited resources available, this makes them utility maximizers *under constraints* (Diekmann and Voss, 2004: 15; Kirchgässner, 2008a: 52). In line with that, terrorists have only limited capacities, which restrict the possible targets they can attack (Shughart, 2011: 126). Constraints may change over time and rational choice includes a premise on how actors are assumed to react to such changes. Rational actors are said to alter their behavior and to re-evaluate their alternatives in the face of a changing environment, in order to find optimal ways to act. This is in line with basic micro-economic reasoning. Of chief importance is that rational actors respond to such changes, namely to incentives and disincentives, consistently and not randomly (Kirchgässner, 2008b: 653). *Responsiveness to incentives* has been a core assumption of applied modern economic studies (see, for example, Koppl and Whitman, 2004) and has also been central to rationalist terrorism research (see, for example, Caplan, 2006; Enders and Sandler, 2004). Terrorists, who respond to incentives, are expected to adapt their behavior and the use of tactics when counter-terrorism measures are implemented or when other threats appear. As for the questions of whom to attack, when to attack, and how to attack, such considerations should also be considered by rational terrorists (Sandler et al., 2008: 11; Shughart, 2011: 127).

Rational choice theory further specifies what kind of information actors have available to form expectations about the outcome of their behavior and whether or not this information allows for unbiased decision-making (*Expectations Axiom*)<sup>18</sup>. Early rational choice models, based on the neoclassical model of economics (“homo oeconomicus”), took a rather strict and unrealistic stance on how actors were expected to act. These models demanded that actors had all information at their disposal and that seeking new information did not impose any costs. Decision-making was thought to be conducted under conditions of complete certainty with respect to the outcome of behavior, so that actors were able to always make the best decision (Akerlof and Shiller, 2009: 13; Wolf, 2005: 46). However, most RC

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<sup>18</sup> This process of expectation building is also referred to as belief formation.

theorists would not deny that these assumptions are only an abstraction of actual human behavior.

Modern economic models do not assume that all participants necessarily have complete information. Rather, information is usually considered to remain incomplete and additional information to impose costs (Green and Shapiro, 1994: 19; Kirchgässner, 2008b: 653). Faced with uncertainty about the outcome of their options, one standard of belief formation assumes actors to build expectations about their behavior, based on *Bayesian learning* (also called Bayesian updating) (Bernardo and Smith, 1994: 4). Bayesian learning has long underpinned most applied economic research and rational choice concepts. The gist of this understanding is that estimates of how likely decisions are to yield the desired results initially rest on a subjective assessment and are only later modified in light of additional information (Caplan, 2000: 193). These subjective initial estimates build on prior personal experiences which are forecasted (updated) with new (and possibly more accurate) information to predict the likelihood of future events (Paulos, 2011). In other words, Bayesian learning promises to gradually bring our views into line with reality.

A stronger, and more demanding standard of belief formation is *rational expectations*. Rooted in macro-economic research from the 1960s, rational expectations theory has also become a prominent, yet demanding, part of rational choice theory (Koppl and Whitman, 2004: 312; Nau, 1999: 11). The premise of rational expectations goes one step further than demanded by Bayesian probability axioms and requires beliefs to be correct *on average*. This is not to say that actors always need to make the perfect choice but that individual mistakes are assumed not to matter in the aggregate (such as in market situations), since they cancel each other out (Cyert and DeGroot, 1974: 522). This requires that actors' beliefs not be systematically biased. Actors are, therefore, allowed to make individual mistakes in building beliefs. But it is important to emphasize that rational expectations demands such mistakes to remain an exception: "Making mistakes is one thing; making the same mistake over and over is another. (...) A person who repeatedly makes the same mistake is irrational in this sense" (Caplan, 2006: 93, 97).

As previously stated, actors are usually considered to be utility maximizers, yet the meaning of utility itself has been largely contested, and

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