

1 Introduction

Research on terrorism and terrorist groups has flourished in the last decade and intensified significantly since the attacks of September 11, 2001. This research has provided us with novel insights into many of the political, economic, social, and legal aspects and characteristics of terrorism. Other aspects, including the ever disputed definition of terrorism, have remained vague or unclear. The “rationality” of terrorists’ behavior also remains an open question. Both the often far-fetched goals stated by terrorists and their brutal and apparently indiscriminate violence against civilians have prompted many to doubt terrorists’ sanity. In this view, terrorists are considered irrational in the sense that they deviate from medically sane behavior. Accordingly, terrorists have been described as mentally abnormal, disturbed or crazy, and sometimes even as “mad” or “evil” (see Merkl, 1987b: 51; Ruby, 2002: 17; Witte, 2005: 72-74). The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has caused such concerns only recently. When addressing the House of Commons to vote in favor of airstrikes against the Islamic State in Iraq on September 26, 2014, British Prime Minister David Cameron referred to the militants as “psychopathic terrorists that are trying to kill us.”

1.1 Terrorists’ Psychological and Economic Rationality

Clinical studies and interviews with terrorists and former terrorists were conducted to clarify whether these perceptions were true, and to provide an answer about the origins and causes of terrorism. Empirical research and interviews have widely discredited the idea that terrorists are mentally ill or psychotic or that they display common mental defects (McCartan et al., 2008; Ruby, 2002). Rather, researchers have found that “the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality” (Crenshaw, 1981: 390) and that “terrorists, by and large, are not insane at all” (Richardson, 2006: 32). A study of Italian terrorists, active in the 1970s, for instance, concluded that “most terrorists have not shown characteristics that can be

attributed to psychic diseases or to distorted personalities” (Pasquino and Della Porta, 1987: 173).

Researchers in economics and other social sciences have made more ambitious claims. They have suggested that the behavior of terrorists can well be understood as rational behavior through models of *rational choice theory* (RCT). Basically, such models demand that actors have stable objectives that they seek to achieve, take into account the costs and benefits of their available options, and choose the one promising to come closest to their objectives. For terrorism studies, this assumption can be specified by characterizing the preference structures of either individual terrorists or terrorist groups. Terrorist groups, which have been the focus of terrorism studies, are supposed to strive for *political* goals in a rational manner. In this view, groups use (particularly) violent means against state representatives, security forces personnel, and civilian targets to coerce governments into making political concessions. If terrorist groups basically act according to these premises, then they can be considered “politically rational” or “strategic” actors.¹ Even violence which, at first glance, appears to be driven by religious zeal alone, may actually be part of a strategic campaign. The brutal and public killing of hostages by ISIS, for example, may be the result of overall strategic thinking and not of “senseless” behavior as claimed by David Cameron (see BBC News UK Politics, 2014).

This understanding of rationality, derived from the field of economics, should not be mistaken for rationality in colloquial language or in the psychological meaning, referred to above. It is also different from other concepts of rationality, often used in sociology, philosophy, and other disciplines.² This means that “the term ‘rational’ conveys a more technical meaning than its general dictionary significance of ‘agreeable to reason; of sound mind; sane’” (Shafir and LeBoeuf, 2002: 492). This also means that mentally disturbed people can act according to the premises of rational choice theory, while sane people may fail to meet these conditions, due to

¹ See, for instance, Crenshaw (1981), Enders and Sandler (2004), Kydd and Walter (2006), Pape (2003), and Schmid (2011). What I call the political rationality model has previously been referred to as the *strategic* model or approach (see Abrahms, 2008; Harris, 2012; McCormick, 2003). Neumann (2002: 133), for instance, notes: “The strategic approach views paramilitary groups as rational actors that pursue tangible political goals.”

² Other concepts include, for instance, *biological rationality* and *cultural rationality* (see, Merkl, 1987a: 10-11).

medically sane calculation errors. The first psychiatric evaluation of Anders Breivik, perpetrator of the 2011 attacks in Oslo and Utøya, for instance, found that Breivik was suffering from schizophrenia and he was declared insane (BBC, 2011a). Yet, the modalities of his attacks – the use of means, timing, and target selection – guaranteed him intense media coverage for his political aims and caused a high number of casualties, as intended. This provides evidence for a rational choice of means.

1.2 Purpose of the Book

Why should we take an interest in the question of whether terrorists can be considered politically rational actors in the first place? Proof of terrorists' rational behavior would open up possibilities to better understand terrorists with only a handful of model assumptions. Such findings would have meaning beyond certain categories of terrorism, such as religious terrorism, which has been the focus of research over the last decade. Even more, proof of the prevalence of rational behavior would indicate how to respond to the phenomenon of terrorism. If, on the other hand, terrorists acted according to an alternative logic other than rational calculation or, if objectives other than political change were primarily reflected within their agenda, this would greatly affect counterterrorism policy (Van Um, 2011: 162). Furthermore, using economic models of rationality in terrorism research has become very common. Yet despite its popularity, the explanatory power of RCT for the study of terrorism remains contested. While many researchers have started from the premise that terrorists act rationally, it remains unclear if this is a valid assumption. Research which helps to determine the explanatory power of rational choice theory for the study of terrorism (and beyond) is, therefore, warranted. The present book seizes this suggestion and seeks to enhance our knowledge in this area. It questions whether the political rationality model is suited to explain terrorist groups' behavior.

It may be helpful to contrast the political rationality model with alternative approaches when assessing its explanatory power. Accordingly, this book also questions whether explanatory approaches, other than the political rationality model, provide better use to understanding terrorist groups' behavior. This enables us to reconsider alternative and competing explanatory approaches, such as the concept of *bounded rationality* by

Herbert Simon (1955, 1995) and concepts that consider motives other than political ones (see Van Um, 2011). But limits remain. This work is based on the concept of rationality rooted in economics but does not incorporate rationalist approaches from the philosophical and sociological field. These remain outside the scope of this book.³ Furthermore, in contrast to many of the previous studies in this field, this book focuses on terrorist groups, not individual terrorists. There is good reason for such an approach which is discussed in the next section in more detail.

1.3 What We Know So Far

It has only been in the last few years that the use of rational choice theory to explain terrorism in general (Anderton and Carter, 2005; Berrebi, 2009; Caplan, 2006; McCartan et al., 2008; Pittel and Rübbelke 2009; Rowley, 2006), and of the political rationality model in particular (Abrahms, 2004; 2006; 2008; Harris, 2012; Miller, 2009; Van Um, 2011), has increasingly been questioned and discussed. Abrahms (2008), for example, rejects the explanatory power of the model of political rationality after reviewing a number of empirical puzzles for this concept. Berrebi (2009) analyzes the behavior of terrorists on operational, tactical, and strategic levels and finds evidence to support rational choice argumentation on all of these levels. Caplan (2006) uses the premises of rational choice theory to evaluate the behavior of sympathizers of terrorist groups, active terrorists, and suicide terrorists. He concludes “that the rational choice model is highly relevant to terrorism – including suicidal terrorism” (92), even though active terrorists and suicide attackers appear to violate the RCT premises in some respects. Rowley (2006) comes to an even more supportive evaluation of the relevance of rational choice approaches in studying terrorism. Distinguishing among leadership, middle management, and foot soldiers within terrorist entities, he finds support for rational behavior on all levels. Rowley concludes, “In my judgment, the rational choice approach is entirely relevant to understanding terrorist behavior” (2).

In sum, research on the (political) rationality of terrorists has increased in recent years and both conceptual and empirical studies have been

³ For an overview of concepts of rationality, see Wolf (2005).

conducted. Yet, the findings remain mixed and, accordingly, the explanatory power of RCT for terrorism studies has not been determined.

1.4 Research Framework

How can we evaluate the explanatory power of the political rationality model? Clearly, an overall evaluation of its explanatory power for the study of terrorist groups is beyond a single piece of work. For this book, two cases have been chosen which are considered puzzles and serious challenges for an understanding based on political rationality.⁴ This reflects the approach of using a *least-likely* research design which has been established in academic research. Levy (2008: 12) explains the benefits of this design: “If one’s theoretical priors suggest that a particular case is unlikely to be consistent with a theory’s predictions (...) and if the data supports the theory, then the evidence from the case provides a great deal of leverage for increasing our confidence in the validity of the theory.” Accordingly, the selection of cases, which are difficult to explain with the political rationality model, promises valuable insights into its explanatory power for the study of terrorist groups.

1.4.1 *Puzzles under Consideration*

The selected cases cover inter-terrorist dynamics, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, terrorist violence directed against incumbent governments. The first empirical analysis studies the puzzle of inter-terrorist group violence. It results from the expected behavior of politically rational terrorist groups, which does not provide for inter-group violence (between groups with shared objectives); and the empirical evidence that these groups clash, nevertheless. It is puzzling that not only groups with competing objectives, but also those which share goals, appear to fight each other frequently, even though such behavior does not help them to make progress in realizing their political demands. This case study analyses whether such violence is a common phenomenon, under which circumstances such violence is likely to occur, what the underlying motives

⁴ A number of further puzzles exist (see Abrahms, 2008).

are, and whether rationalist approaches may account for such behavior. The second analysis examines the puzzle of the political ineffectiveness of terrorist groups. Rational terrorists are expected to anticipate the consequences of their behavior with some certainty and act to maximize their own political utility. This implies that rational terrorists should choose violent means only if these are likely to produce the desired results most of the time. The puzzle of terrorist groups' ineffectiveness stems from the theoretical assumptions, which suggest that terrorist groups achieve their political goals most of the time, and the empirical finding that terrorist groups largely fail to achieve anything.

Both puzzles are fundamental to understand terrorist groups' behavior. In fact, determining what terrorist groups want and their level of success are two of the most fundamental issues in this research field. Unlike previous studies, which often base their arguments on selectively chosen or anecdotal cases, the present book builds on a richer empirical base. This approach complies with the demands that the quality of RCT, on which the political rationality model builds, ultimately needs to be determined by rigid empirical testing (Green and Shapiro, 1994: 32; Shafir and LeBoeuf, 2002: 492). A comparative perspective is also incorporated. Alternative explanations, such as concepts of bounded rationality and criminal behavior, are also tested to determine if these provide better explanatory power. This should provide evidence about the circumstances under which such alternative approaches are better-suited to explain the behavior of terrorist groups than the political rationality model.

Two issues bear mentioning: first, it is noteworthy that both inter-group violence and the political ineffectiveness of terrorists have been considered puzzles for politically rational behavior from a group perspective. This is different from rationalist approaches which study the individual as the subject of analysis in terrorism research. Much of the literature on radicalization, for instance, has chosen such a research framework. This implies that both inter-group violence and the ineffectiveness of groups may be understood, from an individual perspective, as rational behavior. But this study seeks to determine whether the puzzles can be understood through the political rationality model, which assumes groups as unitary actors. Considering terrorist groups this way has been widely established in terrorism research, but ignoring the inner life may still, sometimes, be inappropriate. This issue will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2/2.2.2.

Second, this study looks at the strategic dimension of terrorist groups' behavior. Previous research has often studied whether terrorist behavior may be understood as a rational choice on a tactical or operational level. This research has studied behavior in terms of timing, target selection, and chosen means.⁵ However, this is not the focus of the present book which, instead, seeks to test the *political* rationality of terrorist groups. Accordingly, it asks if terrorist groups act rationally in order to advance their political goals. This suggests the strategic dimension rather than only the tactical or operational dimension of terrorist groups' behavior as the subject of analysis.

1.4.2 Research Strategy

How can we evaluate the explanatory power of the political rationality model? Rational choice theory permits testing through deduction, which means that the actual behavior of people can be studied and contrasted with previously formulated hypotheses.

It is worthwhile mentioning that rational choice approaches do not, *per se*, assume rationality in all cases (Elster, 1986: 16). Rather, RCT provides an explanation for regularities in the behavior of large numbers of actors, such as voters, consumers, or even terrorists. Even defenders of RCT would not deny that actors make mistakes from time to time and deviate from rational behavior. But these mistakes are assumed not to matter in the aggregate, since they remain an exception (Becker, 1979: 154). Accordingly, much of the rational choice literature is based on statistical analysis of large numbers of actors.

It is difficult to define criteria or thresholds to determine the explanatory power of the political rationality model. Based on the previous discussion, I suggest that the model could be considered well-suited if it explained the bulk of the empirical evidence. This does not require the political rationality model to be valid in every single case. However, a systematic violation of either the rationality component or the premise of political motives, on empirical grounds, would be problematic for the concept.

⁵ See Berrebi (2009) for an overview.

The different characteristics of the two case studies require well-adapted methodological approaches which are described in the respective Chapters (3 and 4). In general terms, a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is used to convey a better understanding of terrorist groups' behavior and to test the relevance of the political rationality model in this context. From a macro perspective, quantitative data on a large sample of groups helps to identify whether terrorist behavior can largely be understood with such an approach. Single case studies, which provide much more contextual information, further help to understand terrorist groups' behavior from a micro-foundational perspective.

1.4.3 *Sample Selection*

Which terrorist groups and conflicts should we study to reveal rather generalizable results? There are various criteria available to select terrorist groups, including the size, origin, ideology, and goals of these groups, just to name a few. With a selection based on only one of these criteria, however, a study is likely to suffer from a selection bias. For this book, groups have been identified from a European policy-perspective instead. It uses regulations created by the Council of the European Union to compile the sample for this study. Abrahms (2008) and Kydd and Walter (2006) have used a similar selection based on the U.S. Department of State's list of terrorist organizations.⁶

⁶ These regulations identify and list terrorist groups in Common Positions since the events of September 11, 2001 (see Table 15; Appendix). The Council of the European Union's list (2009a) was the most recent compilation when this research started (see Table 15; Appendix). The EU has adopted a comparatively broad definition of terrorism which was meant to harmonize existing national definitions in the EU member states. Terrorism is defined, based on two elements:

- an objective element, as it refers to a list of instances of serious criminal conduct (murder, bodily injuries, hostage taking, extortion, fabrication of weapons, committing attacks, threatening to commit any of the above, etc.);
- a subjective element, as these acts are deemed to be terrorist offences when committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population, unduly compelling a government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act, or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.

In line with common definitions of terrorism, basically all of these groups have used political violence in order to coerce governments into making concessions. Only Stichting Al-Aqsa, Al-Aqsa e.V., and the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development have been excluded for this research. These are charities that have served the purpose of financing terrorist groups but have not been directly involved in terrorist attacks. The 44 groups, referred to in the document (with charities excluded), are listed in Table 15, based on their country of origin which usually reflects their main area of activity.

Using the EU's list is not without limitations. First, there has been criticism of the practice of listing in general, and of the listing of individuals in particular. The criteria underlying the decision to list individuals and groups have never been made public, so the reasons for listing certain individuals and groups, but not others, remain unclear (see Bolesch, 2008). Second, the EU primarily lists groups that fall under the category of domestic terrorism, so cases of international terrorism are missed. But there is good reason to focus on domestic terrorism. While transnational terrorism has increasingly attracted attention since the events of 9/11, 2001, domestic terrorism remains far more frequent (Anderton and Carter, 2009: 130; Enders et al., 2011: 320; Sánchez-Cuenca and De la Calle, 2009: 32). Third, some of the groups listed may also be understood as guerrillas, rebels, or insurgents, based on their characteristics and behavioral patterns.⁷ The Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso: SL), for instance, has engaged in a massive campaign of terrorist violence, but part of the behavior of this group has rather been guerrilla warfare (Palmer, 2007: 250). Fourth, only groups are listed which have not yet ceased to exist, which misses the many groups that have earlier disbanded. Finally, the EU does not refer to al Qaeda and related groups on the Common Position, but has included these entities in a separate list as of 2002. Al Qaeda, however, has often been considered more of a network than a terrorist group of its own (Cronin, 2013: 45). It would require an enormous effort to study the national cells and organizations of the group in Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere. Even then, what actually comprises al Qaeda would remain contested: "The name 'al Qaeda' (...) has since become an ill-defined shorthand, loosely

⁷ See Schneckener (2012) for an overview and definition of categories of non-state violent actors, including terrorists, militias, and guerrillas.

employed by terrorist leaders, counterterrorism officials, and Western pundits alike to describe a shifting movement" (ibid. 48). Accordingly, Al Qaeda has been excluded from this research.

The EU's Common Position is not a comprehensive reflection of the worldwide spectrum of terrorist actors. However, the list includes groups that differ considerably with respect to key characteristics, including size and ideology. Therefore, it provides a rather good overview of different types of terrorist groups. The EU list covers groups which have used terrorism as their sole weapon of choice, such as the groups in Greece and Italy, as well as groups that have used terrorism as one means among others. Some of the groups listed are structured as cell-based, others as mass-movements. Groups in Italy or Greece have usually not comprised more than a few dozen members. In Colombia, by contrast, left-wing groups have consisted of several thousands of militants and thousands more supporters and sympathizers.

1.5 Organization of the Book

The remainder of this book consists of four chapters. Chapter 2 explores the components underlying the notion of political rationality. The motive(s) of terrorists and the presumed prevalence of political motives are discussed in the first section. The second section elucidates the core characteristics of rational choice theory which is, furthermore, contrasted with alternative concepts of rationality. Chapters 3 and 4 provide the empirical analysis in this book. Chapter 3 discusses the puzzle of inter-terrorist group violence. It questions whether engaging rival groups can be understood as evidence of politically rational behavior or if this indicates alternative motivations or irrational behavior. Chapter 4 elaborates the second case study, the political ineffectiveness of terrorist groups. This chapter questions whether groups which use terrorism actually regularly fail to achieve their political goals, something claimed in academic research. Alternative concepts, which may better account for terrorists' behavior, are applied and tested. Chapter 5 concludes the book and summarizes the results of the previous empirical analyses. This chapter also provides an assessment of the explanatory power of the political rationality model for the study of terrorist groups, based on the findings from the two case studies.

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